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MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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novel by
BRETT HALLIDAY

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a blazing new novel of
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MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

FEBRUARY, 1967 Vol. 20, No. 3

TWO NEW SHORT NOVELS

THIEF IN THE FAMILY

by BRETT HALLIDAY

In that house of hate a power-hungry woman had sworn her vengeance on the man who had dared to penetrate her dread secret. And somehow, across two worlds, Mike Shayne must get him—dead or alive!

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INSIDE THE HIDDEN MAN

by JAMES McKIMMEY

Deep inside him, young Keith carried the key to a terrible riddle. And even as thousands were cheering his name, he knew the one answer—the answer that must bring him to a violent end.

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MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE, Vol. 20, No. 3. February, 1967. Published monthly by RENOWN PUBLICATIONS, INC. 56 W. 45th St., N. Y., N. Y. 10036. Subscriptions, One Year (12 issues) $6.00; Two Years (24 issues) $12.00; single copies 50¢. Second-class postage paid at New York, N. Y. and at additional mailing offices. Places and characters in this magazine are wholly fictitious. © 1966, by RENOWN PUBLICATIONS, INC. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. Postmaster—return 3579 to 56 W. 45th St., New York. 10036

THIEF IN THE FAMILY

A NEW, COMPLETE MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

A smiling killer . . . a fortune in gems . . . send Mike Shayne on a mission halfway across the world, where he'd come back with a king's ransom—or very dead!

by BRETT HALLIDAY

MIKE SHAYNE drove along the edge of the sea on the blacktop back road just north of Miami. The sea was blue and smooth to the right, the underbrush thick and tangled to the left.

It had been at least a half an hour since Shayne had seen a house. Before that, ever since he had left the highway, the few houses in the area had been the shells of ancient mansions standing like gaunt survivors of some holocaust.

The red-head drove with his panama tilted back on his shock of thick red hair and his grey eyes moved slowly from side to side, studying the country. His gaunt jaw was set in harsh lines as he observed the overgrown and neglected landscape.

© 1966, by Brett Halliday

Shayne knew all about the area. Once the proud, exclusive and remote bastion of some of the oldest and most snobbish families in Florida, it had long ago fallen on evil days, brought on in a large part by its self-isolation and refusal to compromise with the changing times.

Now it was a wasteland. The families died out; the mansions were ruins; the once well-tended lawns and English-style private parks had gone to seed and desolation, all but a few die-hards who had proven stronger than their neighbors.

Shayne smiled grimly as he continued to drive along the deserted road. Here was a true survival of the fittest. Here some four or five families had survived, while all the others had gone under. And the survivors were tough.

Shayne had heard of Mrs. Bithiah De Quincy Hawkes. He had never expected to meet her. Now it looked like he would. The telephone call had been short and sweet. Mrs. Bithiah De Quincy Hawkes wanted to hire Mr. Michael Shayne. Mr. Shayne would come to *Pays Perdu,* the home of the Hawkes, and at once.

Message and command had been relayed by one Hazel Manning, secretary to Mrs. Bithiah De Quincy Hawkes. The Miami detective's first impulse had been to laugh, his second to swear, and his third to hang up. But curiosity got the better of him.

So here he was driving along the back road amid the desolation of past glories on his way to meet the relic of the past who had swallowed up half her neighbors. He smiled wryly to himself and wondered for the tenth time what Mrs. Bithiah De Quincy Hawkes could want, or need, from a private detective.

He came around a bend in the road and there was *Pays Perdu.* Shayne blinked as he saw the great house. It was like coming out of a forest and seeing a palace. A great stone pile with turrets and bay windows and balconies and galleries all around it seemed more like something from the 18th Century rather than the 19th Century.

It was set in a wide and magnificent country park with great groves of trees, immaculate gardens, and grounds so well kept it must have taken an army of gardeners.

Shayne stared and almost went off the road. The immaculate and grand mansion was in such sharp contrast to all the ruins he had passed on the way. He was already getting a pretty good opinion of old Mrs. Hawkes. It took guts and strength to survive, even prosper, while everyone you knew was going under. And it was clear that Mrs. Hawkes had prospered.

The great lawn and grounds swept down in a curve to the sea. At the edge of the sea a long pier jutted out into the blue water with an elaborate bathing *cabana* at the end. A wide and sweeping drive

curved from tall iron gates in the stone wall to the massive portico of the house.

Shayne turned into the drive and felt in his car something like an insect exposed on a vast open table as he drove up the long arc and reached the portico entrance.

An old man in the full livery of a butler hurried down the steps to greet him. Shayne got out. The old butler bowed, called him by name, and indicated that Shayne should follow him.

Shayne followed up the steps and through doors as tall as the gates of a museum into a vast entrance hall. He blinked again. The interior of the massive mansion was old, soft, with the look of having been warmly lived in. The butler led him to the right, into a fine old baronial living room. He then turned softly, and left the room.

For a moment Mike Shayne thought that he was alone. Then he sensed a movement. He looked toward the shadows near the giant fireplace and saw her.

She sat in a high-backed throne-like chair of dark wood and thick red velvet. The chair enfolded her like some dark red mouth. She was a smallish woman dressed in a severe black dress with a high choker collar. She wore long loops of pearls. Rings flashed on her bent old fingers. Her face was long and sharp—an aristocratic face with deep, cold blue eyes that watched Shayne without blinking.

Shayne grinned and strode to her. Her eyes appraised him.

"You're a big man. I like big men. My second husband was a big man."

"Good for him," Shayne said.

"Big but not strong enough," Mrs. Bithiah De Quincy Hawkes said. "You look strong."

"I tear telephone books," Shayne said.

Mrs. Hawkes smiled a thin smile. "Muscles are one thing, strength is another. That was the only positive attribute the men of the South had during the war—they knew the difference between strength and muscles. They were men. So they died. I refer, of course, to The War Between The States."

"Muscles and muscle are different things too," Shayne said. "The North had the muscle."

"Sinews of power, very true," the old woman said. "I think we will understand each other, Mr. Shayne. You may sit down."

Shayne held his panama in his hand and looked around the room. It was a tall room, the walls hung with endless paintings of men and women of the long past. Slim men with cold eyes. Strength not muscles, Shayne agreed. The men in the portraits looked like they could face a three hundred pound giant with a walking stick in their hands and win.

"You have time for a trip on my behalf, Mr. Shayne?"

"That depends," Shayne said, shrugging.

"On what?"

"On whether I take your job or not."

The old woman's eyes flashed in sudden anger at this hint that Shayne would decide for himself whether or not he would work for her. Then she suddenly smiled, the cold eyes twinkled under the well-tended white-grey hair.

"Of course, Mr. Shayne," she said. "But I don't think you drove all the way out here with the intention of turning my work down. Did you?"

Shayne laughed. "All right. I'll take it unless it's too ridiculous. Now just what is the job?" the redhead asked.

"I want you to find my nephew and get back from him my jewels and some money," Mrs. Hawkes said promptly.

"Jewels? Are they very valuable?" Shayne asked.

"I should say, Mr. Shayne," the old woman said, "that they are probably the least valuable item you have ever been asked to find! No, they are essentially worthless. They have no value even sentimentally, really."

"Then . . ." Shayne began, watching her face for a reaction.

The old woman's eyes flashed like the eyes of a tiger in the jungle. "No one steals from Bithiah De Quincy Hawkes, Mr. Shayne. No one!"

II

MIKE SHAYNE watched the hard mouth, cold eyes. A tough old bird, there was no doubt of that. He saw why *Pays Perdu* was still a mansion while the rest of the area was a ruin.

He was glad he was going to be on the same side as Mrs. Bithiah De Quincy Hawkes.

"And your nephew has stolen?" Shayne asked bluntly.

"He has!"

"You want me to get your jewels and money and bring your nephew back?"

Mrs. Hawkes snorted. "I don't care a fig what you do with Gerald! I want my jewels and my money, what there will be left of the money. There will not be much. I know Gerald."

Shayne pulled slowly on his left earlobe as he watched the old woman in her anger. He had little sympathy for thieves, especially for nephews who stole from old ladies, but he had a certain vision of what life at *Pays Perdu* must have been like for a nephew of Mrs. Hawkes, and he had a small sympathy for Gerald. It would not have been a life Mike Shayne would have wished on a dog. But stealing was not the answer.

"All right, Mrs. Hawkes. I'll take the details. Start with Gerald."

"Gerald is of less importance than the jewels!" the old lady

snapped. "I care nothing about Gerald."

"If I'm going to find him, I have to know about him," Shayne said drily. "Take it from the top."

Mrs. Hawkes' nostrils dilated dangerously, but at last she nodded. "Of course. You are quite right. I am beginning to think that you do know your work, and perhaps I will see my jewels again. Very well. Gerald Hawkes is my grand-nephew. His father was De Quincy Hawkes, the son of my late husband's brother Morgan Hawkes. All the men of my family, Mr. Shayne, were gallant men without, how did you put it, muscle? They were all gallant, proud, fine and utterly useless in the twentieth century.

"My husband died in a fall from his horse. He was riding to aid a neighbor about to be evicted. He took his normal route across the fields. As he reached our neighbor's boundaries he discovered that the new owners had placed barbed wire strands on top of our old stone walls. Rather than change his course he jumped the wall as usual. The horse, of course, failed to see the wire and fell. They were both killed."

The old woman's eyes were deadly, as if she were still seeing the men who had put up that wire. "My brother-in-law, who named his only son after our family, he had married my cousin, was killed in a street brawl when he attempted to save a Negro woman from a gang of Dade County rednecks.

"His son, De Quincy, was killed by a man who had insulted his wife in public. Naturally, De Quincy took only his whip when he went to chastise the man. He would not use his pistol on such trash. The man shot him."

Now the old lady's eyes showed pride—better to die than use a pistol on trash. "Gerald was his son. My grand-nephew is the new breed, if the term can be used for men without breeding. I had not seen the boy for many years. His mother took him away after De Quincy was killed. She did not approve of our ways—our barbaric ways, as she called them. The result of her way I found later.

"Two years ago Gerald appeared. His mother had died some years earlier. He had spent his time

since her death becoming a weakling, a coward, and a sycophant. He had never worked a day in his life. He had been in prison once for cheating a woman of her money. He is small, weak and a bully! He is a liar and a gambler who does not pay! What happens to him I do not care. But I want my jewels!"

"Can you describe him a little better?" Shayne said.

The old lady reached into some recess of her dress and handed Shayne a photograph. The detective looked at it. It was a full length shot of a man about thirty, dark-haired, with a thin mustache and a weak face. He was wearing a hounds-tooth sport jacket, a colored waistcoat of some light color, and pale grey slacks.

The man wore an unmistakable signet ring on his right hand, and there was a prominent scar just under his eye. Shayne would have little trouble identifying Gerald Hawkes—if he found him.

"What was he wearing the last you saw?" Shayne said.

"As it happens, just about as you see there. I did not spoil Gerald with clothes. He left in rather a hurry, I gather, and took practically nothing with him—except my jewels and money!"

Shayne put the picture into his pocket. "How much money did he take?"

"Some twelve hundred dollars, I believe. My secretary can give you the exact details. It was in my room in the same drawer with the jewel box."

Shayne raised a ragged red eyebrow. "You always keep that much cash in your room "

"Not always, Mr. Shayne, but I always have cash around the house. I keep cash in many places. The safe in my study has more than ten thousand dollars in it at this moment. One of the major lessons I learned in my life, Mr. Shayne, is that the carpetbaggers live on interest. I will lend, but I never borrow. I use my money; I do not lend it to a bank at puny interest!"

The old woman suddenly smiled craftily. "It is well known that I do not use banks, but keep much cash on hand. This serves two useful purposes. No one knows how much money I have, and can't find out. And everyone thinks I have much more than I do, so will always give me credit—a fact that enables me, in essence, to borrow without paying interest."

Shayne rubbed his gaunt chin as he listened to the wily old woman. He was getting more and more knowledge of just how the old pirate had managed to survive all her neighbors. It was not easy to visualize how Gerald had managed to steal from her. This thought must have shown in his eyes. The old woman interpreted correctly.

"Yes, Gerald outwitted me this time—except that he did not do it with brains. It was pure chance. I

am an old woman, Mr. Shayne, and I have the problems of age. I had a small fainting spell two days ago. It turned out to be nothing, but I was alarmed. I had Dr. Padgett take me for a check-up. In my alarm I forgot the money.

"I was out of the house the entire afternoon. When I returned the jewels and money were gone—and so was Gerald." The old woman snorted scornfully. "He was so afraid he grabbed and ran without even packing his things! I gave him until this morning to return. Then I called you."

"Not the police?"

"Gerald is worthless, but he is a Hawkes. I want no police. In the first place the amount involved is too trifling, in the second place I don't want Gerald imprisoned. The loss of my patronage, the money, and the jewels will be enough. Gerald will be penniless and afraid all his life. That is prison enough."

"If the jewels are so worthless," Shayne said, "he won't have money for long. Why bother to spend my fee to get it back if you don't want him punished?"

The old lady's eyes flashed again. "I want to forget Gerald, not forgive him. No, he must not get away with it. It is worth a lot more to me than your fee to let him know that he cannot defeat me! If he keeps his gains, then he has left me. If I get them all back, strip him, then I have cast him out!"

Shayne tugged on his earlobe. Mrs. Bithiah De Quincy Hawkes was a hard old nut.

"If the jewels are so worthless why did he steal them?" Shayne said.

The laugh of the old woman was loud and clear. "Because he does not know, Mr. Shayne. I would almost give the whole twelve hundred dollars to see his face when he learns. You see, Mr. Shayne, they are family jewels. A necklace, two bracelets, four rings, and two pendants. No more. The stones are diamonds, rubies and two large emeralds. My secretary will give you an exact list.

"They are quite famous in Florida—the De Quincy crown jewels, wags have called them. Unfortunately, many years ago, in order to get a start, I sold all the real stones! The jewels Gerald so cleverly stole are glass! Oh, no one knows this. It was very useful to let people think I still had the jewels. I have even borrowed on them. No one ever suspected that I would pledge fake jewels. Of course, old Harrings knows. He's my lawyer.

"Still, I want them back. Real or paste, they are the jewels of my family. The settings are real enough, and of some value. I am not sentimental about them, Mr. Shayne, but the sentiment they represent is valuable to me in many ways. They are a symbol of the De Quincy's and the Hawkes. I mean to have them back!"

Shayne nodded. "All right. Now

what can you tell me about where Gerald might be, and who his friends were?"

The old lady sat lost in thought. She seemed to be both remembering and trying to imagine just what Gerald Hawkes would do.

"Gerald spoke often of lounging in some tropical place. It was his dream. He was a born remittance man, a loafer who needed money. I have heard him speak at different times of Rio, of Central America, of Tahiti, and of Hawaii. I doubt if he would now have gone to Hawaii.

"As for friends, I knew few of them. My secretary can probably tell you more. I do know that he talked often with a man named Charles. The man had a strange first name."

"Foxy Charles?" Mike Shayne snapped.

"Yes, I think so. You know him?"

Shayne nodded. "A bookie, fair-sized. You said Gerald was a gambler."

"He was. There were also two boys named Axel and Mort, both what I believe you call 'beach bums'. Gerald seemed to like them. They frequent some establishment called *The Deep Six*. I know, because I have many cancelled checks from that place, some signed over to Axel and Mort. I suspect that Gerald merely used those checks to obtain cash for himself."

"A nice boy," Shayne said. The red-head stood up. "You can pay me and I'll get to work. From the sound of Gerald, he won't be too hard to find, even with two days start."

"My secretary will pay you," the old woman said. "And remember, I care nothing about Gerald, but I do not want him arrested. I want my jewels and all the cash you can get from him. I do not much care how you get it all back, or how you handle him short of murder. I will ask no questions."

Shayne nodded and left the old woman with the fire still flashing in her eyes.

III

WHEN HE reached the entrance hall and closed the door to the vast living room behind him, after a walk that was about half as long as crossing Grand Central Station in New York, the ancient butler was nowhere in sight. He thought for a moment he was going to have to find the secretary, Hazel Manning, on his own, when a door across the wide hall opened abruptly and a tall woman hissed at him.

"Mr. Shayne. Here!"

Shayne looked at her. The command was like someone calling his dog. Shayne slowly put his hat on his head and stood rocking on his heels and staring at the tall woman.

He looked her up and down very slowly. She was nearly six feet tall and had the muscles to match. He

estimated her at one hundred seventy-five pounds dry.

She had a long face that would have looked good in the paddock at Belmont, and a nose that would have been the envy of any noble Roman. Her eyes were as cold as Greenland's icy mountains. The eyes were staring at Shayne now, particularly at his hat.

She was not dumb. She had seen and understood the gesture of the hat and the slow appraisal. He expected a blush. He got a snarl.

"I'm paying, Mr. Shayne, not you. If you don't like my manners, that's unfortunate. I don't like snoopers."

"Maybe we could debate it in the gym," Shayne said.

Now she flushed. For a second, Mike Shayne could have sworn she clenched her fists. Then she shrugged.

"I have the check and the material in here," she said.

She turned and vanished inside the opened door. Shayne frowned. There was something odd about Hazel Manning. She moved on the balls of her feet, smoothly like a trained boxer. Despite her size, she obviously had control of her body. Her voice was strong, and there was something peculiar about her hands—they were calloused, the nails short.

The red-head sighed. He had lost this round. Either he went with the formidable Miss Manning, or he gave up the case. But he did not like nephews who absconded with the family jewels, even if they were paste. So he walked across the vast entrance hall and through the open door. He was in a neat and efficient study. Hazel Manning handed him a check. He looked at it and put it into his pocket.

Lucy Hamilton

"The list of jewels?" Shayne asked.

Miss Manning handed him another slip of paper. It contained complete descriptions of the jewels. He pocketed that.

"The exact amount of cash?"

"One thousand, two hundred, and twenty-seven dollars," Miss Manning snapped. "If I know Gerald most of it is gone already. And since I know Gerald, I'd suggest you talk first to Miss Melody Dawn!"

Shayne raised a bushy eyebrow. The muscular Miss Manning smiled for the first time.

"Melody Dawn?" Shayne said. "You can't mean it."

"I'm afraid I do," Miss Manning grinned. "Gerald, as I'm sure you've figured out by now, had exotic tastes. What is the saying, 'Slow horses and fast women?' Melody isn't really very fast. She's a dumb blonde stripper at a two-bit joint. But she has the looks men like, and the disposition they hope goes with it."

"Where do I find her?"

"At *The Deep Six*," Miss Manning said. "If she's still there. She's dumb enough to have gone with Gerald."

"What else can you tell me about Gerald?"

"Not much. He's not too bright himself, but he thinks he is. He considers himself very cunning. It's my bet he'll live off the money as long as possible and not even try to sell the stones until he has to. He would consider that smart. Wait until the heat's off, or some such movie-line. He certainly won't try to sell them in this country."

Shayne nodded. "What's your guess about where he is?"

"Rio or Managua," Miss Manning said promptly. "If he's made it that far yet. Gerald tends to be easily sidetracked. I say Rio because he saw at least two television shows I know of where the crook went to Rio to escape extradition. Managua, because Nicaragua always fascinated him—something to do with William Walker, the famous filibuster. Gerald had dreams of glory."

"I thought he had dreams of being a rich loafer," Shayne said.

"Both. I told you Gerald wasn't so bright."

Shayne listened to the information given him. He also listened to her voice. It was odd. It had the sound of a person of little education, and from a not-so-good background, who had worked hard to acquire a veneer and had almost made it but not quite. There was something tough about Hazel Manning, something from a different world than where she was now.

"Any other tips?" Shayne asked.

"No, that's all I can tell you," Miss Manning said.

Shayne heard rather than saw the entry of another person into the study. Before he could turn, the voice drawled out high-pitched and slow.

"I can tell you a lot."

Shayne turned and saw the small, slender man. But not before he had seen the look of absolute contempt on the face of Hazel Manning as she looked at the newcomer. Shayne sensed that he would probably agree with Miss Manning's obvious appraisal of the small, thin man. Or boy.

The newcomer was obviously far along in his twenties, but his manner was entirely that of a spoiled small boy. His sandy hair was lank and hung over his soft, almost girlish face. He lounged indolently against the door.

"I can tell you all about Gerald.

The way he played up to grandmother."

Shayne looked at Hazel Manning. The secretary nodded to his unanswered question. "Yes, this is Quincy Frazer, Mrs. Hawkes' grandson. She only had one child, a girl."

"She didn't mention Quincy here," Shayne said.

The young man whined. "Grandmother never does. She paid so much more attention to Gerald than she ever did to me, her own grandson." The stripling smiled maliciously. "Now he's paid her back! I always said he would, a jail-bird like him. The way he buttered her up! Why, she even got to prefer him to me!"

Miss Manning said, "Can you guess why she didn't mention our Quincy?"

Shayne eyed the girlish man. "He is kind of a butterfly. She must have been hurt when Gerald defected."

"Gerald was not much improvement," Miss Manning said. "I'll grant Quincy that much."

The young man had flushed crimson as he listened to them. Then his face darkened.

"I don't need your defense, Miss Heavyweight Champion!" the young man cried. "And I don't give a damn in hell if she liked Gerald better than me! I don't care how much time she spends with you and Gerald. I'm her grandson, and I know what that means! You, whatever your name is, you get those jewels back, because they'll be mine! You hear? Mine!"

Quincy Frazer ran out like a girl about to sob. Shayne sighed. He noticed that Miss Manning had a half smile on her horsey face as she looked at the space vacated by Quincy. But he also noted a whitening at the corners of her mouth which showed that the "Heavyweight champion" barb had hit home.

Shayne decided to let her down gracefully by giving her something to say. Besides, he had a question.

"I didn't get from Mrs. Hawkes the idea that she had doted on Gerald. But from our butterfly I get the impression that Gerald and the old lady were close."

"In a way," Miss Manning said. "Gerald operated sort of like her assistant. I don't know if you know the history of the family, but the men tended to be very romantic, if that's the word, and the women practical.

"Mrs. Hawkes wanted Gerald to be practical, to know the land and how to run the estate. I helped too. But Gerald wasn't much good. She kept trying. I guess this final bit was such a shock she's gone overboard the other way."

Shayne tugged on his left ear. "But not all the way. She won't prosecute."

Miss Manning shrugged. "Gerald is a Hawkes."

Shayne thought about it. "You

mean if she had a man around she would have him horsewhip Gerald, but no police?"

"You're smarter than you look," Miss Manning said.

Shayne grinned. "That's what they all say."

"You're right, of course. Horsewhipping and reduced to a poor relation is about what she has in mind for Gerald," Miss Manning said, "but no outside interference, no blot on the name, no publicity."

"I get the picture," Shayne said. With a final smile he strode out the door and across the vast entrance hall to the massive front door. As he walked out into the sun toward his car, he was thinking more about Hazel Manning. The woman was definitely a strange one. Hazel Manning did not fit. She was not the secretary type.

Still mulling this over, Shayne got into his car and started down the long drive that curved back toward the black-top road. He reached the open gate and the road and turned right toward the highway to Miami. Just before the low wall that surrounded *Pays Perdu* ended, Shayne passed a small grey car parked on the side of the road. The car was barely visible, parked deep among a grove of trees.

Mike Shayne stopped.

The car was empty. There were no other houses for miles, only ruins. The beach in front of the Hawkes mansion was deserted. There were no boats on the water and no one walked on the road. Shayne pulled off the road a hundred feet away and parked his car deeper in the woods and out of sight.

He walked back to the grey car. He looked in and opened the glove compartment. There was no identification of any kind. But there was a loaded .45 caliber automatic nestling inside.

Shayne stared at the pistol and then at the low stone wall almost hidden by overgrowth. He went to the rear of the car and took down the license number. Then he walked through the bushes to the wall and climbed to the top.

At first he saw nothing.

Then he saw the clear trail in the tangled underbrush that led straight toward the mansion of *Pays Perdu*.

IV

MIKE SHAYNE slid down from the wall and followed the trail silently. It was a clear trail; the track of a man who either knew little about walking through brush or did not care about a trail he might leave.

It led unwaveringly toward the distant mansion.

Shayne followed the trail cautiously until he saw the grey walls of the mansion directly ahead across the wide lawn that surrounded it. He stopped in a clump of thick bushes and peered out. He saw the parklike area of trees, then the wide lawn, and then the house

with its lush growth all around at the base of the grey walls.

Then he saw the man.

The man was stooped, squatted behind a tree, and yet seemed tall. He had a pair of binoculars and was watching the house carefully. Shayne could tell nothing from his clothes, an ordinary business suit, and the man had his back to the detective. Then the man moved.

The man with binoculars stood and walked quickly forward to another tree. Shayne saw that he had a distinct limp in his left leg, and that he was tall. But he still could not see his face. He knew only one thing for sure, it was not Gerald Hawkes.

He crouched and studied the man, who was so engrossed in his own watching that he seemed to have no idea that he was being watched in turn.

Shayne considered what to do. He could stay hidden until the man showed his face, and then tackle him. Or he could move in on the man immediately. He was duly hired by the owner of the property, the man was a trespasser. Shayne drew his automatic and stood to approach the man.

He neither saw nor heard the third man.

Or woman.

The blow struck his head and he went down and out without a hint as to who had hit him. The last he recalled, before everything went red and then black, was the limping man up ahead turning to look. He saw nothing else; he only heard dimly the footsteps of two people running away toward the road and the spot where the grey car was parked.

When he came to, the sun was still in the sky, but it was lower, shining diffuse through the trees. His head throbbed. He felt light and floating, and he found himself wondering idly just how many times he had been hit on the head. He decided that his head was a complete mass of scar tissue. He had no head, nothing but bruises and the results of bruises. A kind of armored shell that had developed and replaced his real skull.

He wondered if it was necessary to be hit on the head so often.

He considered that a detective solved more cases by the bumps on his head than by the brains inside.

He wondered if his brains were also scarred.

Shayne shook his head. His eyes cleared and he knew where he was. He was flat on his back under the trees of the mansion of *Pays Perdu*. He had a lump on his head and there was blood on the ground. He sat up.

The trees swayed in the sun. He felt his head. It was soft and wet. He decided that his brain was soft. He should have known there would be two!

He looked around, holding to the ground with one hand. No one, apparently, had seen him lying

there. His pistol was on the ground beside him. They had hit and run. They had wanted no part of being seen on the grounds. A limping man about forty, and who else? Gerald Hawkes? If so, why?

Shayne stood up. He swayed. He bent to pick up his gun and had to hold onto a tree quickly. He felt ill. He stood holding onto the tree for a time. The nausea passed and he put his automatic back into its holster.

Why would Gerald Hawkes come back? Because he had found out that the jewels were fake? Maybe the absconding nephew had learned of the fakes and had believed that the real rocks were still in the mansion somewhere. Then who was the other man? And why was he watching so carefully?

Shayne looked around again. He saw no sign of life in the mansion, no one on the grounds. It was a hell of a way to start a simple case of a runaway nephew. If they knew anything in the house they would certainly not talk. If they didn't know anything, Shayne had no desire to let them know how he had started—out cold under the trees.

He began to walk carefully, his head still pounding and spinning. He retraced his steps, looking on the ground for any clues. There were none. He reached the wall and climbed over. The grey car was gone. He went back to his own car, which was just where he had left it. He climbed in, lit a cigarette and sat for a time behind the wheel, smoking.

The case might not be a simple matter of an absconding nephew after all. The deal had suddenly become complicated. And it had become personal. Shayne was getting tired of being the target for every blow to the head in Florida. And there was now an unknown element—two strangers and a grey car. Two people who had a reason to watch the mansion of Mrs. Bithiah De Quincy Hawkes.

He finished his cigarette and started his engine. As he drove back along the desolate back road, past the ruins of all the old houses that had once been as good as *Pays Perdu,* he was wondering just exactly what the two men had wanted to see at the mansion. He doubted if he would know until he found Gerald Hawkes—and he must find Gerald Hawkes.

He reached Miami just before five o'clock. The streets of the city were thronged with homegoing people and the endless traffic of rush hour. Shayne considered going to his office, but there was still time for work.

He checked into his doctor, had his head bound up again while the doctor clucked like a mother hen and asked him if he liked his head being used as a dummy for men with clubs. He left with his panama perched on the top of the bandage.

He drove to Ray Incavo's third best night club and gambling es-

tablishment on the southern edge of Miami Beach across the Causeway. When the red-head strode in, Incavo's bartender and headwaiter went for their alarm buttons with as much subterfuge as startled gophers. Shayne managed a grin under his bandage as he strode toward the back-room door into the gambling rooms.

It was early and there were almost no customers in the Club. The "boys" of Incavo were lounging. The frantic buzz of the bartender and headwaiter jerked them alert.

The two on the door saw Shayne. Their hands snaked toward their pockets. Shayne abruptly changed course and went into the bar. He slid onto a stool while the hard boys gaped with their hands in midgrab and egg on their faces.

"Evening, Mario," Shayne said to the bartender.

Mario nodded, "Mr. Shayne. Sidecar?"

Mario was a good bartender and a good lookout. He showed no surprise that Shayne had changed direction and turned from a threat to the boss into a customer. One second before, Mario would have split his skull if he had stepped an inch closer to Incavo's lair. Now Mario was all bartender, and anxious to serve.

"Too early, Mario. Bourbon and water will do. And some talk," Shayne said.

Mario poured the bourbon and water. "You know better, Mr. Shayne."

"This is okay. I'm just looking for Foxy Charles. No sweat and no trouble."

"You want to lay a bet?"

"No, I'm just looking for a customer. All clean. It might even be worth Foxy's while."

Mario served the bourbon and water, gave a final stir with the swizzle stick. "Foxy'll make his drop and pickup here in fifteen minutes." Mario looked up at Shayne. "I figure you knew that, Mr. Shayne."

"Not the exact time," Shayne said, and grinned. "Besides, I don't want you high-signing him off. Just give him the all clear to come over."

Mario nodded and went to tend to the needs of a middle-aged couple who had the pale skin of the North and did not seem to be having the ball they had expected when they took the special one-week all-expenses-included tour to fabulous Miami Beach.

Shayne drank his bourbon and water and waited. He lit a cigarette and considered his fat and bandaged head in the mirror. Fat head was just right. He had been sapped like an amateur again. Maybe he was getting old.

It was fifteen minutes to the dot when Mario looked up and at the door. Shayne did not turn around. He saw Foxy Charles in the mirror. Foxy had come in, all smiles, to

pay or be paid. He had seen Shayne's back. Foxy knew every back in Miami that could be trouble. Foxy had turned to leave fast when he saw Mario the bartender's high sign.

Foxy was wary. He came over like a crab: sideways and ready to scuttle. Mike Shayne smiled.

"Hello, Foxy. How's business?"

Foxy blinked. "Swell, Mike, swell. Yeah, okay. Sure."

Foxy was a big man but he seemed small. He had the long, bony shape of an old frontier preacher, and the long, sad face to match. But he scuttled like a small man, and his eyes looked everywhere at once. He was nervous and timid and ready to jump out of sight at the first hint of danger—like a fox.

"I need some help, Foxy," Shayne said.

Foxy nodded. "Sure, Mike, sure. Anything you want. I mean, I don't know nothin', but—"

"You know this, Foxy," Shayne said. "Gerald Hawkes. I'm looking for him."

Foxy looked around for help or escape. "Hawkes? No, I don't know—"

"Yes you do, Foxy," Shayne said. The red-head held a ten dollar bill in his hand. Foxy's eyes watered. Money made the bookie sentimental. "You're not involved. I'm just looking for him for his family. He went off without leaving a note."

Foxy took the ten. "He laid bets with me. Two years, off and on. He was a loser. Had it all doped like he spent half a day every day. He was a plunger."

"He had money?" Shayne said.

"Some. A ten dollar trick mostly," Foxy said.

"When did you see him last?"

"Two days ago. He lost."

Shayne rubbed his chin. "Two days? You're sure?"

Foxy nodded. "He said he was taking a trip."

"Did he say where?"

"New York, maybe," Foxy said.

"Why maybe?"

"He talked like he was gonna see the Big A."

Shayne tugged on his left earlobe. So Gerald had talked about Aqueduct Race Track! And Gerald had known he was going to leave, which made it more planned than the old woman had led Shayne to believe. It looked like Gerald had planned his run even before the opportunity for the jewels and money had come. Maybe the theft was an afterthought.

But one fact was good for Shayne: Gerald was a real horseplayer, and horseplayers were a breed apart. They had to have a track, and that made them easy to find most of the time. Shayne dismissed Foxy Charles.

"Okay, Foxy, and thanks."

"Sure, Mike, sure," Foxy said and scuttled off like a crab let out of a trap. Foxy was heading for the

deep water, the nice muddy water he liked.

Shayne finished his bourbon and decided to pay a visit to *The Deep Six*. New York looked like a good bet, but it would probably be only a stop on the way, and they might know more at *The Deep Six*. Before he left he called in to his office. He was glad he did. Lucy was waiting to hear from him.

"There's a man here to see you, Michael. I told him it was after hours, but he insists."

"What's his beef, Angel?"

"I don't know, Michael, but he says its about a Mrs. Hawkes and her nephew."

"I'm on my way, Angel. Hold him there."

The red-head paid for his drink, nodded to Mario, and strode to the door. He almost heard a sigh of relief behind him where the "boys" of Ray Incavo watched him go.

V

THE MAN was heavy and distinguished. A gentleman gone to fat, but with courtly manners and shining grey-white hair. He stood when Mike Shayne came into his private office, and bowed with a short nod of his leonine head.

"Mr. Shayne," the man said. "My name is Manley Harrings, Judge Harrings. I am Mrs. De Quincy Hawkes' attorney."

"Glad to meet you, Judge, sit down."

Shayne sat behind his desk, tossed his panama on the desk and watched the elegant old gentleman sit facing him. Harrings looked like a friendly old philosopher, but Shayne guessed from the pale blue eyes and stiff bearing that Judge Manley Harrings was no one to play with.

Harrings noticed the thick bandage on Shayne's head.

"I forgot to duck," Shayne said. "What can I do for you, Judge?"

"You can tell me just what you're doing for Mrs. De Quincy Hawkes," the judge said.

"Did she tell you?"

"No. I want—"

"Then I don't see what I can tell you," Shayne said bluntly.

The old man colored. His leonine face went red. His eyes seemed about to burst into flame. Then he saw the steel grey eyes of Shayne, and his face changed. He smiled a thin smile and nodded slowly.

"All right, Mr. Shayne. Then I shall tell you what I know. You have been hired to find Gerald. He has stolen the jewels. You know, of course, that they are fake?"

"I know," Shayne said. "Why did she sell them? She seems to be doing all right."

"Ah, yes, she is now. In a way she was then, too. But Bithiah is an odd woman. She does not believe in idle wealth, she trusts only money, cash. You know she doesn't believe in banks? I see you do. She is a shrewd woman, but that is one of her peculiarities.

"Many years ago, after the death of Mr. Hawkes and before I came into the scene, she sold just about everything left and turned it into cash. With the cash the husband left her, she's operated ever since. But she has too much cash. I've told her so many times!"

"Maybe she'll learn now," Shayne said.

"I doubt it, Mr. Shayne," Judge Harrings said. "She has never been robbed, and she is fanatic on not letting anyone know how much money she might have. Her watchword is, 'Let the carpetbaggers guess!' "

"She's been robbed now," Shayne said drily.

"So she has," Harrings said. "Have you managed to locate any clues yet as to Gerald's whereabouts?"

"Some," Shayne said. He had been carefully watching the elegant old man all the time. Judge Harrings had something on his mind. The judge was beating wide around the bush.

"I suppose he did not abscond alone," the judge said.

"I wouldn't know," Shayne said. The red-head suddenly leaned forward. "All right, Judge. Just what did you really come here for?"

"I beg your pardon! I—" Harrings began to bluster.

Shayne cut him off. "Tell me, huh? You knew I wouldn't tell you anything if Mrs. Hawkes wouldn't. You didn't come to give me a lot of information I already have. You're fishing, mister. What for?"

Judge Harrings stood up. "I think I better leave now, Mr. Shayne."

Shayne sat back. "Suit yourself. You're the one who came to me."

At the door Harrings turned. "Just be careful how you handle the matter, Mr. Shayne. Bithiah is unpredictable, but she is my client, and I am not without power in the state, you understand? I would not want her hurt or cheated in any way. Do I make myself clear?"

"Clear as a stripper's veil, Judge," Shayne grinned.

The judge flushed crimson, started to say something, clamped his mouth shut, and stalked out. Shayne stared after him. He had not expected the old man to be so easily shocked. The judge had blushed like a schoolboy caught peeking into the girls locker room.

Shayne tugged slowly on his left

earlobe. Judge Harrings had something more on his mind than the interest of his client. The speech of warning had been a smokescreen. The judge wanted to know something. But what?

It looked like Harrings had some interest in Gerald Hawkes that was not the concern of his client. Shayne tugged harder on his earlobe. He had mentioned a stripper, just by accident, and Harrings had reacted.

Shayne was thoughtful. He was thinking about Melody Dawn. It was only a wild shot, but did Judge Harrings have some interest in the stripper? The judge had asked about whether Gerald had run alone.

Shayne looked at his watch. It was probably still too early for Melody Dawn and *The Deep Six*. But maybe the two others, Axel and Mort, would be in view by now.

Shayne buzzed Lucy Hamilton. His pert secretary came in. Her brown eyes were curious.

"The judge seemed like a nice man, Michael," Lucy said hopefully, her brown eyes asking for details.

Shayne grinned. "I have my doubts how nice the judge is, Angel. But he is fishing." The red-head frowned. "I'm beginning to think Gerald Hawkes is involved in something a little more devious than running off with an old lady's jewels."

"Really, Michael?" Lucy prompted.

"Just guessing, Angel. But let's find out a few things, eh? I want you to call Tim Rourke and ask him to see if he can identify this license number." He gave Lucy the license number of the grey car, and he described the tall man he had seen watching the mansion. "After that you might as well close up shop and go home. If I'm needed, I'll be at *The Deep Six* for a while at least."

Lucy Hamilton was disappointed. "All right, Michael."

Shayne clapped his panama on his head, and winced as he forgot the bulky bandage and the lump beneath. "Don't worry, Angel, I'll call you if anything develops."

Mike Shayne reached the street and got into his car. He drove through the heavy semi-tropical twilight across the nearest Causeway into Miami Beach. The evening traffic was heavy as usual, and Miami Beach was as crowded as ever. Shayne watched the glory of the sunset over the Bay and the long sweep of blue water on the ocean side of the narrow strip of sand that was Miami Beach.

The Deep Six was a small night club on a side street near the heart of the Beach. There was little to distinguish it from a hundred others. It had a narrow leather-covered door, curtained windows, and a standing billboard outside. It was the billboard that caught Shayne's appreciative eye. It was a chastely-covered full length picture of

a magnificent blonde—Melody Dawn.

Shayne eyed the picture and had to admit that Gerald Hawkes, whatever else he was, was a man with a good eye for a fine shape. Shayne looked at the eyes of Melody Dawn. They were big and bright, maybe too bright, and not so dumb as he had expected. But that was probably the work of the photographer or just the angle of light.

Shayne went through the black-leather door.

The inside of the club was dim—it was dim at ten in the morning, no matter how bright the sun outside. It was the kind of place that could have been anywhere on earth, and probably was in one form or another. It had that womb-like warmth and shadow that most men seem to want at some time.

There was a small bar along the left wall, a low fence-like room divider between the bar and a section of tables crammed so close together the waiters would just about have to pass the drinks in to the center tables, and a tiny stage at the far end.

At this hour the stage was bare and empty, looking as though no one had ever stepped out onto it. The table section had exactly four customers—one lone man and three girls together, whom the lone man watched every second and grinned each time one of them happened to glance his way.

The three girls, who had obviously come in because they were on vacation and lonely and desperately in need of males, glared at the man as if his smiles would contaminate them.

Shayne stood for a moment and watched the drama. He had seen it a thousand times before. The girls wanted masculine attention. They wanted a man, a male. But they did not want a man who just grinned at them.

They wanted to be approached like goddesses, bowed to, flattered. They wanted to be given credit for not wanting a man that way, to be approached by a man who respected their reluctance and waited, hat in hand. They wanted a man, but they hated a man who knew it. They hated a man who grinned and asked them to meet him halfway.

Disgusted, Shayne turned to the bar. There were five men at the bar. Two were tourists still wearing their northern suits. One was a local old-timer who drank and minded his business, which was drinking.

The last two were identical blond young men with the long hair and tight pants of beach bums. They could have been twins, except that one of them had a heavily-shadowed face and was obviously too old to be what he was.

Shayne sat at the bar near the two beach bums. The bartender came slowly. It was not yet late enough for the hustle to start. In

two hours the bartender would move to a new customer like a Nazi divebomber zeroing in on a stray refugee.

Now the man just ambled in his own sweet time. It was the bartender's form of protest. He was a fat man with a belly that moved like a thick liquid under his soiled T-shirt.

"Yeh?"

"Sidecar, easy on the cointreau," Shayne said. He tossed a twenty onto the bar.

The bartender became more polite. In a place like *The Deep Six* a twenty dollar bill was very good manners.

"Sidecar, huh? Now I ain't got a call for that in a while. You all from—"

The bartender looked at Shayne's tan, the panama perched on the bandages, the hard hands and shock of unruly red hair. He was sizing Mike Shayne up as to origin.

The tourists loved to be identified, to have the bartender know where they came from by just looking at them. People like to feel cosy and among friends. "The west, mister?" the bartender asked.

"Alaska," Shayne said. "Make the drink."

The bartender was offended. He shuffled his fat off to make the worst sidecar he could make. But he caught the gleam in Shayne's eye and decided to make a good one. When it came, Shayne smiled and stared hard at the bartender in his best "cop" manner.

"Tell me about Gerald Hawkes," Shayne said.

He spoke to the bartender, but he watched the two beach bums out of the corner of his eye. He got what he wanted. They both half choked on their drinks and looked at Shayne. The red-head was in luck. They had to be Axel and Mort.

"I'm looking for Hawkes," Shayne said to the bartender.

"Good luck," the bartender said and walked away.

"I'll find him, and his friends," Shayne said.

He felt rather than saw the two beach bums stand and come to him. They were both good sized, and a lot younger than Shayne.

"You want Gerry?" one said, almost in a whisper.

"Maybe you oughta tell us what you want with Gerry," the other one, the older one, said.

They were both menacing. Then they saw the look in Mike Shayne's eyes. The red-head grinned at them.

"Okay," Shayne said. "You got me. Let's talk."

VI

THE TWO beach bums saw their mistake. They looked around for help. There was no help. Shayne stood and dwarfed them. He nodded to a corner table.

"Let's be comfortable while we talk."

The older one tried to move away. "We got business, mister."

The second one tried a lie. "We don't know no Hawkes anyway," he said.

Shayne shrugged. "You can talk to me, or you can talk to the police, or I can beat it out of you. Take your choice."

"We got nothing to hide," the older one said. "Mort, let's sit with the man."

The younger one, Axel, nodded. Shayne followed the two of them to the table. Both had that quick and wary walk of men who made their living the easiest way they could and were never sure when someone would decide he didn't like them. Shayne didn't like them. They sat down and looked at him as if they knew that.

Shayne grinned. "Axel and Mort in person. I've heard about you boys." He made it sound as if he knew a lot more about them than he did, and that most of it was bad. They knew how bad it could be, and they believed him.

"The name's Shayne, Mike Shayne. I'm looking for Gerald."

"We don't know nothing," Axel said.

Mort had been around longer. He was just beginning to sense a chance maybe to sell something, probably Gerald. He eyed Shayne cunningly.

"Why do you want Gerry? I mean, maybe we could help," Mort said.

"I figured you could," Shayne said. "When did you see him last, for instance?"

Mort shrugged. "I don't remember. You know?"

Shayne's eyes narrowed to steel points. "Sonny, you'll tell me one way or the other. Now, I can beat it out, or I can make life pretty hard for you around here. Either way wouldn't worry me much. But I'll tell you what I'll do. You tell me all you know, all I want, and maybe I'll be nice. You take the chance."

Mort flushed. Axel looked scared. Beach bums are not criminals and they are not bums. But they skate close to the law, they hang on the edge of being legal bums, and the good citizens don't like them. It makes life precarious if easy.

Axel was the type who worried. Shayne figured he would not be a beach bum for long. Axel's fate was to go back to Daddy's money sooner or later. Mort was a tougher nut.

"For twenty-five bucks, we'll tell you," Mort said. "Each."

"For twenty-five bucks you'd sell your soul, if you had one," Shayne said. "No promises. Maybe ten bucks each if I like the song you sing."

Mort shrugged. "Start the music, Shayne."

"When did you see him last?"

"Two days ago, around this time," Mort said.

"He was in a hurry," Axel said. "Loaded!"

Mort swore. "Don't give it away, Ax, you jerk!"

Shayne laughed. "Come on, both of you. Now you know I'll give you the tenners, and you know you'll sell Gerald all the way, so let's just give everything you remember. He was here in the evening two days ago. He was in a hurry, and he was loaded with a bundle of cash. Right?"

Mort was sullen. "Yeah."

"How much?"

Mort shrugged. "Twelve hundred, about. That's what he told us, anyway. Said he won a big bet and was taking off from his old bag."

"How much did he give you," Shayne snapped.

"A lousy couple of—" Axel started to say bitterly, and stopped.

Mort swore. "You damned stupid—"

"Two hundred? Each or apiece?" Shayne broke in.

"Two hundred for both of us," Mort said.

"You know he lifted it," Shayne said.

Mort nodded. "I figured. You can't get it, Shayne. We're tapped out. We owed, you know?"

"Let's say I forget it, okay?" Shayne said. "Now give me the rest. What about the jewels?"

Mort and Axel looked at each other.

"What jewels?" Axel said.

Mort wondered. "He was kind of hopped up. Real happy, like he'd pulled a real fast one. Yeah, that was it. I know Gerry pretty good. He'd pulled something. Jewels, huh? Worth a lot?"

"Rumor has it about five hundred thousand dollars!" Shayne said, making a very rapid estimate of the stones on the list, in case Mort had seen them and was lying. The value if they had been real, of course.

Axel and Mort gaped at Shayne. Mort suddenly went white as a snowbank. The older beach bum had just realized that this was no penny ante game, that Gerald had real trouble. Their surprise was genuine; they had not known about the jewels. This ruled out a possible theory Shayne had been considering, that Mort and Axel were somehow involved in casing the mansion and in slugging him.

Mike Shayne said, "It's serious, all right. But all the people want is the loot back, no charges. Do Gerald a favor. Let me catch him first. Where did he go?"

"New York," Mort said. Suddenly the older beach bum wanted to talk. His devious mind had realized that he might get involved, and involvement was the last thing he ever wanted. "He told us he was flying up and staying with a buddy on North Bank Street for a while. The address was one-twenty-four North Bank Street—name of Reston, Paul Reston."

"He went alone?"

Axel nodded. "She wanted to go, but he told her not yet. She said he told her he'd send for her. That'll be the day!"

"He talked to Melody alone?"

Mort nodded. "Only her name is Amy. Amy Lutz. God, what a name! No wonder she finally changed it."

Shayne had to agree. He found it hard to think of a stripper named Amy Lutz.

"Is New York the last stop?" Shayne asked.

"As far as we know," Mort said. "You figure it out."

Shayne peeled off two tens and laid them on the table. "One more question. No, two. Do you guys know a tall guy with a limp in his left leg who drives a grey coupe?"

Both of them seemed to think.

"No," Mort said.

Axel was not so sure. "Maybe I saw a guy like that with Gerald once. I ain't sure."

"Okay. Last question. When does Melody come on?"

Mort looked at the clock. "About an hour for the first trick. She oughta be backstage about now."

Shayne released the two tens and stood up. He smiled as the two beach bums grabbed the money and headed for the bar.

Shayne started for the door into the dressing rooms. The bartender looked like he had some idea of stopping the red-head, but Shayne gave him a glance and the bartender seemed to think better of the idea. The fat man shrugged and went back to his glasses.

Shayne entered the dingy corridor behind the gay walls of the club. The light was feeble and the smell was strong. He went along the corridor, past open doors where tired-looking men dressed wearily in shabby tuxedos and barely glanced up as he passed the door.

He passed open doors where faded women rouged flabby cheeks and wriggled into dance belts and G-strings. A final open door revealed Melody Dawn.

The beautiful blonde did not look up. She was dressed in a Japanese kimono that covered her figure, but she still loooked too good for any man. She was working on her face, which did not need work, but, like a woman, she worked on it anyway.

She saw Shayne in the mirror. Apparently she liked what she saw, because her face had a dazzling smile as she turned and looked the red-head up and down.

"Well hello!" Her voice was soft and musical. Shayne again decided that Gerald Hawkes must have more than he seemed.

Shayne stepped into the room and closed the door. "Hello," he said.

Melody eyed the closed door. "You're nice, but not that nice."

"Am I nice enough to get answers to some questions?"

Melody raised a fine eyebrow, and pulled the kimono a little tighter around her gaudy cleavage. "That depends. You a cop?"

"Private," Shayne said. "Mike Shayne."

"The real Mike Shayne? I heard of you." The blue eyes narrowed. "What kind of questions a private cop got with me? I'm clean; I don't sell it."

"Questions about a friend," Shayne said. "Okay if I sit down?"

The girl nodded him to a straight chair a proper distance from her. The red-head was glad to sit. Where he had been standing the kimono had done an inadequate job of covering the upper regions of Miss Melody Dawn's anatomy.

"What friend, and what kind of trouble is he in?" the girl said. She lit a cigarette to cover nervousness.

"Gerald Hawkes, and the trouble could be bad," Shayne said.

"What about Gerry?"

Her hand shook but her voice was steady. The voice was casual and the hand soon stopped shaking. She crossed her legs and pulled the kimono closed over her magnificent legs.

Shayne admired her. She was young, but she was no fool, and she had a lot of poise and guts.

"I think you know," Shayne said. "I've talked to Mort and Axel, among others."

The girl smiled bitterly. "Those two? Then I guess you know. Those two creeps'd sell their mother for a drink. So why come to me?"

"Because Gerry isn't in bad trouble yet. He could be, but not from me. I've been hired to find him, get the jewels and any of the cash left, and that's it."

"That's it?" Melody said.

"No charge, no police. Just recover what he stole from the old lady and leave him free," Shayne said.

The girl looked at him for a long minute. She smoked and her blue eyes studied Shayne. At last she stubbed out her cigarette and turned her back to the detective.

"Get out of here," the girl said.

"I'll find him," Shayne said.

"Not with my help," Melody said.

"It'll be best for him if I find him first," Shayne said.

The beautiful girl whirled. "Will it? Oh, you maybe think I don't get the picture? That's what that old bastard wants! Take it all, leave Gerald a bum on a far-off beach, broke and alone in a place where he can't even speak—"

The girl stopped. She stared straight at Shayne. The red-head shrugged.

"You might as well tell me where. What did he do, tell you where to meet him?"

"Go to hell!"

The eyes of the girl were even more beautiful when she was angry.

"I'll get the loot, Melody," Shayne said. "Even if I don't, do you think you can last long on what he stole? You think he'll go to work when the money runs out? And he'll be on the run all his life, because if I don't get the stuff the old lady'll be sure to call in the cops in the end.

"Right now she says he can get off the hook, family honor and all. But in the end money will talk and she'll call the cops. They'll find him."

"Maybe and maybe not. I happen to like Gerry. He gets a break from me."

"He'll send you back to stripping sure as hell. Maybe a lot worse when you're not so young," Shayne said.

"Not if you don't find him," Melody said.

"The jewels, Melody?"

The girl said nothing; she only stared.

"They're fake, Melody," Shayne said softly. "All fake, not worth five hundred bucks."

The girl watched Shayne. She turned slowly back to her mirror.

"I don't believe you," she said at last.

"I work for the old lady," Shayne said. "Her lawyer knows. Judge Harrings. You know him?"

"Why would she hire a peeper to get back fakes?"

"Pride and spite. She wants them back for the family, and she doesn't like anyone getting away with anything on her."

The girl nodded into her mirror. "I believe that."

"Then help me find him."

"No," Melody said.

Shayne watched her for a moment. He would get no help from her. She was loyal and honest. Dumb, yes, but at least she knew by intuition what a friend stood for. She planned to join Gerald no matter where he was or what he had done. She was going to have a hard enough life without Shayne. The red-head stood up.

"All right, Melody. But I'll find him."

"Maybe, maybe not," Melody said.

Shayne nodded and left the girl. He saw tears in her eyes. She had probably had a hard life, and she knew it would get harder. Maybe she had hoped that Gerald was

her break. Now it looked like just another kick in the face. Shayne felt sorry for her, but he had a job to do, and he did not feel sorry for Gerald Hawkes.

In the corridor he stopped to light a cigarette. At least the girl had told him one thing—Gerald Hawkes planned to make his final run to some country where he did not speak the language. And he planned to meet Melody. Which meant that he would have to be in contact. Shayne could leave a man to watch Melody and her mail. Meanwhile—

Shayne stopped thinking. He had heard a familiar voice out in the main room of the Club through the door. The red-head blended into the shadows of the corridor behind the door. A man came through the door. A heavy man with elegant clothes and elegant grey-white hair.

Judge Harrings.

Shayne watched the judge head straight for the dressing room of Melody Dawn. The red-head came out of the shadows and his grey eyes stared after the judge. So Harrings knew Melody. No fool like an old fool. Or was it something else besides an old man's romance? Maybe the judge wanted to find Gerald too.

Shayne slipped out the door into the club. The band was warming up. Shayne saw Mort and Axel working on a tourist at the bar. The sight of them made him think of Gerald Hawkes' friend in New York. It might be faster to have a talk with Paul Reston. A trip to New York couldn't hurt.

But it was now late, and Gerald would keep another day. Shayne needed sleep and a meal, and he wanted to know what Tim Rourke had found out about the man in the grey coupe. In the street he got into his car and drove back toward the Causeway and his apartment-hotel. When he got home he called Rourke, but the reporter was out of the office.

VII

THE JET took off into the morning sun and circled once high over Miami. Then it flew steadily north and Mike Shayne settled down for the long flight. He was thinking about his talk with Tim Rourke early this morning.

The elongated reporter had awakened him with the call. Shayne took it in bed. Rourke's voice had not been encouraging.

"No luck, Tim?"

"Not on the car," Rourke said. "Registered to a trucking company that does interstate business. I checked with the company this morning. They say the car is a company car used by all their drivers off and on. It sits in a parking lot at the terminal here. They've got about fifty employees who use it, and they admit that sometimes the employees let

friends use it. They keep no record; they couldn't say who used it yesterday."

"How about the description of the guy? Did anyone recognize that?"

"Not at the trucking company, but I'm working on it. To tell you the truth, Mike, the description does ring some kind of bell in my dim brain, but I can't figure what. I've got the boys here at the paper working on it."

"Okay, Tim, and thanks. Let Lucy know if you come up with anything. I'm going up to New York."

He had hung up, showered, had his breakfast, secured a place on the New York jet, and called Lucy Hamilton. He instructed Lucy to hire one of the men he used for routine work, and have the man keep a twenty-four-hour watch with his staff on Melody Dawn and her mail. Then he left his address in New York, the hotel where he liked to stay, and drove to the airport.

Now he sat in the jet and thought about the case. So far it all fitted, except for two factors. Gerald seemed to have acted just about the way that was to be expected—a little stupid to talk, and a fast run with the loot. New York first would be logical, harder to trace the next move than in Miami. All that didn't quite fit yet were the grey car and its two men, and Judge Harrings' connection to Melody Dawn—if there were one.

The jet reached New York on time. Shayne walked out into the terminal building and caught a taxi into Manhattan. It was a good bright day and the red-head enjoyed the drive across Queens. In Manhattan itself he checked into his hotel and went up to his room. Looking at the telephone book he found that there was a Paul Reston at 124 North Bank Street.

Shayne took his automatic and left his room. He decided to walk. The streets of the city were crowded as usual. When Shayne saw the crowds he was always proud of modern police work. To look at the great city you would think that no one could ever be found in it if they wanted to hide. But it was as hard to hide in New York as in the middle of a desert.

Gerald Hawkes would know that much. It would be only luck if Shayne found the nephew still in the city after almost four days now.

The red-head reached North Bank Street and walked along in the sun toward No. 124. It was the usual quiet, small Greenwich Village street, lined with brownstones and small red and white brick buildings. There were the shops and the cellar bars. Shayne walked toward the river. As he approached 124 he slowed down and studied the quiet area.

It was now just past noon and the streets were not crowded.

They were not deserted. The usual number of sightseers walked along. Sleepy-eyed young men and girls who worked nights or dreamed of art in their small rooms strolled by.

Shayne took off his shoulder holster and his jacket. He put the pistol and holster into the jacket pocket and slung the jacket over his shoulder to look like a simple tourist sightseeing.

Number 124 was a six story old-law tenement brownstone. Its cellar was a leather shop, where sandals and handbags were made by hand. Its first floor was a neighborhood tavern with its doors open and two early customers silent at the bar where the bartender read a tabloid.

Shayne noted the fire-escape on the front of the building. At least Gerald could not elude him by going out the back, if he were still here, which Shayne doubted.

He strolled along to the two steps up to the entrance, saw that he was for the moment unobserved, and went up the steps and into the hall. A row of dilapidated mail boxes filled the left wall of the entrance foyer.

Shayne saw the name of Paul Reston on Apartment 8. That would be the second floor rear. There was a bell under the mail box, and mail in the box.

The mail meant that Paul Reston had either not been home yet, or was still in his apartment

and had not come down. Shayne considered using the bell, but discarded the idea. He looked around, saw that he was alone, and took out his ring of special keys. The lock on the door was a common one, and Shayne had it open with the third key he tried. He put the ring of keys back into his pocket and entered.

He closed the door behind him and walked silently along the narrow hallway of the old tenement. It was a dim hall, the walls painted that dull ivory favored by all New York tenements, the floor made of tile that had once been white. Shayne heard the sounds of people behind the shabby doors. But no one appeared, and he climbed the dirty marble stairs to the second floor.

Apartment 8 was at the end of the corridor, its door set at an angle and facing Apartment 7. The toilets were in the hall, the doors padlocked to show that this tenement was at least kept in some sanitary condition.

Shayne stopped outside Apartment 8 and listened. For a time he heard nothing. Then a man coughed, and he heard the sound of something being stirred in a cup. There was no sound of conversation.

Mike Shayne knocked.

There was a silence. Then a pleasant voice. "Who is it?"

Shayne mumbled something unintelligible but with an eager and friendly tone. A man like Paul Reston in a Greenwich Village tenement would have many friends who called unasked and eager.

"Door's open," the voice called.

Shayne opened the door and stepped into the room. He closed the door behind him and took the scene in at a glance. The room was artistic-shabby in the usual Village style. There was a typewriter on a table surrounded by books and piled manuscripts.

There was an expensive record player and a cabinet of records. The walls were covered with drawings and unframed paintings. The rest of the furniture was second-hand junk shop. A large double bed was unmade in the corner.

"Who the hell are you!"

The man was stocky and muscular. Mike Shayne eyed him. Reston was clearly a body-builder, or had been. He wore a T-shirt that bulged with muscles, and a pair of tight Levis. He sat at a bare wood table with a coffee pot and a cup of coffee. He had been reading. Now he stared at Shayne. The red-head walked toward him.

"The name is Shayne, Mike Shayne," he said. "You Paul Reston?"

"Yeh, I'm Reston. How the hell did you get in without ringing the bell?"

Shayne grinned. "I used magic. Nice pad you got here."

"I like it. Now what's your business, mister?"

Reston was about thirty, he needed a shave, and his eyes were deep and dark. He was surprised to see Shayne, but he was not alarmed or nervous. Shayne sat on a straight chair and faced the muscular man.

"I'm on a treasure hunt," Shayne said.

"Swell," Reston said. "You want a cup of coffee?"

"Maybe," Shayne said. "I want Gerald Hawkes. If I still rate coffee, I'll take it."

Reston's eyes glinted. "Why not? Black?"

"Black," Shayne said. "Is Gerald still here?"

His quick study had told him that it was unlikely that Gerald was still in the apartment. He saw nothing that looked like the presence of a transient, the bed had been used by only one person, there was no sign that anyone had slept on the couch. But he wanted Reston to answer.

"No," Reston said.

"You admit he was here then?" Shayne said and sipped his black coffee. It was good coffee. Paul Reston had hidden talents.

"Why not? He's a friend of mine. What are you, a private cop?"

"That I am," Shayne said. "Good coffee."

"I've worked as a chef. Who wants him, the old lady?"

"You're guessing a hundred percent today."

Reston shrugged. "It's not hard. He told me he'd run out and lifted a grand or so. He figured he had it coming for all the jazz he took from her."

"He didn't have to take it," Shayne said.

Reston nodded. "I admit Gerry was no angel. Sure, I'd have cut out after a week, but Gerry figured he'd hold out for the money. That's what he told me anyway. He stood it as long as he could, and when he saw his chance, he grabbed what he could find and ran."

"To you?" Shayne said.

"I told you, he's a friend."

"How good a friend?" Shayne said.

Reston watched Shayne now. "What does that mean?"

"Just what it sounds like," Shayne said quietly. "If you know where he is, and you're a real friend, you'll tell me."

"How does that make me a friend?"

"If I get to him first he'll be broke but he'll be alive and walking the streets," Shayne said.

"And if you don't?"

"He might be dead; he'll certainly be behind a lot of bars for a long time."

"The cops are going to comb the world for a lousy thousand odd bucks?" Reston said.

"No," Shayne said, "for a lousy half a million bucks worth of family jewels."

Reston neither blinked nor moved. The only surprise the muscular man showed was a slow, reflexive opening and closing of his left hand that made his biceps move like the belly of a cooch dancer. He stared straight at Shayne. With his right hand he began to stir his coffee—only the cup was empty now.

"Half a million?"

"In round figures. All big stones," Shayne said. It was obvious that Reston knew nothing of the jewels, real or fake.

"They'll crucify him. That old bitch'll never give up."

"That's about the picture," Shayne said, "unless I get to him first."

"That'll help?"

Shayne nodded. "Right now the old lady is feeling family conscious. She wants the rocks and all the money he still has, and no more. No charges, no arrest. I just take the loot and leave him on the beach. Where is it? Rio?"

"No," Reston said. "You say you pick up the stolen stuff and leave him alone? No charges?"

"That's my instructions," Shayne said.

"How do I know I can trust you?"

"You don't, Reston, but if I'm right he's got real trouble without me," Shayne said. "Look, I know he left from here. I know he's in some Spanish speaking country."

Shayne didn't know that, but it was a good guess with Rio out. "All I have to do is alert the New York cops and they'll alert every cop in Latin America. He'll be caught. Sooner or later he'll have to peddle the jewels, and every cop in the world will be waiting."

Reston nodded slowly. "Okay. He's in Caracas."

"Venezuela?"

"Last I heard Caracas was in Venezuela," Reston said drily. "He's hiding out in a flea-bag hotel I told him about, called the *Casa Verde*. It's a place Americans don't go. He's using some phony name, I don't know what."

Shayne stood up. "Thanks. Believe me, you've done him a favor."

Reston looked at Shayne. "What if he doesn't want to give up the stuff?"

"He'll give it up," Shayne said.

Reston let his glance move up and down Shayne. "Yeh, I guess he will. Leave me out, okay? And take it easy on him."

"As easy as I can," Shayne said. "Thanks for the coffee."

"De nada," Reston said.

Shayne walked out and into the dingy corridor. He went down and on the street turned left and walked fast. Now he wanted to get to Gerald fast—before the nephew tried to peddle the fake stones. He hailed a taxi and went to his hotel.

He booked a seat on the next jet to Caracas and checked out of the hotel. He just had time for lunch before his flight left Kennedy.

VIII

THE JET swept in over the mountains. Caracas lay below, the tall modern buildings white in the sun. But even from so high, Mike Shayne could see the cancerous slums that surrounded the glittering tourist attractions.

Shayne checked through customs and caught a taxi for his hotel. He had no idea how long it would take him to locate Gerald and persuade him to part with the loot.

At the hotel he lit a cigarette and looked out over the city. He considered whether to contact the police first. It would be wise. Latin American police did not like American private cops working on their own in their territory. On the other hand the police would be sure to want to charge Gerald.

It would be best, he decided, to leave the police alone until later. He would have to go to them when he had the jewels to be able to get them out of the country. Shayne had an attested list and appraisal from the Manning woman, and his authorization to work for Mrs. De Quincy Hawkes.

The Miami and New York police would vouch for him if necessary. He would have the jewels identified and sealed by the Caracas police, and opened by the New York police. But for now, if he was to follow the old lady's instructions, he would work on his own.

This decided, he located the *Casa Verde* in the telephone book. His knowledge of Spanish would be important. He again checked his automatic, made sure he had his credentials and pistol permit, and went out. He found a taxi and gave the address of the *Casa Verde.*

Shayne spoke in Spanish, and the driver showed only a little surprise when he heard the "gringo" give the address. It was obviously not an address the driver had expected from a North American.

The taxi drove along the glittering prosperous-appearing main streets of the bright city. The well-dressed people looked oblivious to care. Soon the taxi entered the slum section. Here there were no well-dressed people. There were, however, great crowds of people. They clogged the streets and thronged at the edges. They leaned out of the windows of their hovels. The people looked at the taxi with a kind of torpor, and also with a kind of hatred. Shayne would not like to be alone here late at night. He guessed that he carried enough cash for a year's food for a man.

The taxi crawled among the people who filled the streets. At last it stopped in front of one of the few stone buildings on a steep hillside street. A faded sign read: *Casa Verde.*

Shayne told the driver to wait, but the man refused. Not in this street. The American could call for him when he was needed. Shayne argued but got nowhere. He paid the man and watched the taxi disappear.

He stood alone on the sidewalk. Thin, dark-eyed people stared at him. He felt more than uneasy. He doubted that he would get much help from these people. They would back Gerald without asking a question, simply because Gerald was another victim in their eyes.

Shayne touched his suit coat to be sure his automatic was ready, and entered the *Casa Verde.*

An odor of decay struck him like a blow in the face. The lobby of the *Casa Verde* was worse than the lobby of a dollar a week flophouse on the Bowery. And yet Shayne could see that it had once been a decent if modest hotel—somewhere in the dim past of Ca-

racas, before the coming of oil, American money, and tourists. It was small but cool, with heavy stone columns that cut the lobby up into many small cul-de-sacs.

Shayne had already decided to use the waiting technique rather than make direct inquiries, especially since he did not know the name Gerald was using—if, indeed, Reston had told him the truth! He had, though, no real reason to doubt Reston, especially since he had found out that a man answering Gerald's description had indeed taken the flight to Caracas the day before.

Luckily, the lobby of the *Casa Verde* was ideal for a stakeout. Not only could he sit behind a pillar in the far left corner in such a way that he could see the entire lobby and the stairs while remaining virtually hidden, but no one paid any attention to him.

The desk was deserted. There seemed to be no clerks anywhere, no personnel of the *Casa Verde* of any kind. Only two other human beings were in the lobby, and both slouched asleep in the shabby chairs.

Shayne settled in the dilapidated chair behind the column and began his vigil. From time to time he smoked. He pulled his panama low over his face, and when he was not smoking feigned sleep with his companions in the lobby. The few people who shuffled into the lobby paid him no attention.

No one seemed to care who he was. If he was seated in the *Casa Verde,* he could be of no interest or importance.

Mike Shayne soon learned one of the reasons.

The first person who came down the stairs was a European or American. The wreck of a European or an American. He was a skinny middle-aged man in a white suit. The suit had not been pressed in weeks, had probably never been cleaned. He was middle-aged but looked ancient. He needed a shave four days ago and his hands shook. His tongue licked at his lips in the typical unconscious habit of a drunk who badly needs a morning drink.

Shayne watched him shuffle, twitching as if his body was in pain, which it was, across the lobby and out into the sun in search of any alcohol he could find. With Europeans or Americans like that in the hotel, it was no wonder that no one paid any attention to Shayne. They were used to shabby North Americans who slept in the lobby all day.

The second and third persons were shabby Venezuelans who had a vague aura of having some business to do.

The fourth and fifth looked like men from the back country who for some unwelcome reason had been forced to make a trip to the capital.

Shayne had a long wait for the

sixth person to appear. He had smoked five cigarettes and pretended to sleep for hours. Already the sun was becoming low outside the dim lobby. The sixth man seemed to be another non-Venezuelan. He wore riding breeches and high boots. The breeches were dirty and the boots split. He had all the air of a prospector far down on his luck. He was the first to care enough to look at Mike Shayne, to notice a stranger.

But he saw nothing of interest, and passed on out into the light, his lips moving as he went as if he were rehearsing some speech. Shayne guessed that the man was probably rehearsing some sales pitch to get money for more prospecting. Shayne did not think the man was going to have much success. It did not look like he had had much success for a long time.

No more people came down the stairs. The seventh patron of the *Casa Verde* came in from the street. Shayne slouched low. It was Gerald Hawkes!

Mrs. DeQuincy Hawkes' nephew had made some effort to disguise himself, but it was a bad attempt. He had bleached his dark hair; it was a dirty brown now. He had shaved his thin mustache, but the mustache had been so small it made no difference.

The scar was still there, and Gerald wore the same clothes he had run in! Even the heavy signet ring was still on his right hand. His main attempt at disguise was a pair of large, ludicrous dark glasses that only served to draw attention.

The man had not even had the sense to try to blend into his surroundings. His clothes were much too good. They were dirty, and they would fade fast, but now they were still much too clean and well-kept for the *Casa Verde*.

The runaway walked quickly across the lobby, barely glancing at the other two men. He did not see Mike Shayne.

Gerald did not stop at the desk, but headed straight for the stairs. Apparently they did not worry about keys and who came or went at the *Casa Verde,* although Shayne had a strong hunch that if a patron attempted to leave without stopping to pay, someone would appear instantly.

Gerald went up the stairs. Mike Shayne stood up and followed quietly.

He did not follow too close; he did not have to. Gerald's leather-heeled shoes rang against the stone of the stairs and halls. Shayne followed the sound up to the third and top floor.

He reached the landing, walking lightly and soundlessly, just as Gerald stopped in front of a door down the hall. Shayne remained out of sight at the head of the stairs. Gerald looked back once, saw nothing, and let himself into the room. Shayne heard the lock turn in the door.

The red-head stepped lightly down the filthy stone corridor like a French prison guard on his way to bring a man out of his cell for execution. He reached the door and stood listening. For a time there was no sound inside the room. Then Shayne heard the sound of water being poured from a jug into a bowl. It was the opportunity he wanted. Gerald was washing.

Shayne studied the door and the lock. It was a thick, heavy door. The lock was an old iron lock, massive. But he could see that where the lock fitted into the wood the door had become rotten over the years. It should break in fairly easily.

On the other hand it might hold and Shayne had no idea if there was a good escape route from the room or not. There probably was, since the shabby houses of the slum were built wall to wall with the roofs at all levels.

With Gerald busy washing, Shayne decided that a more devious method was preferable. A man washing is not going to be alert if his suspicions are not aroused. Shayne stepped softly away from the door and backed along the dirty corridor. Then he approached the door boldly and knocked.

There was a sharp silence. "Who is it?"

Shayne smiled. He was sure Gerald did not speak Spanish, but it was good to have the fact confirmed.

"It is the clerk, senor," Shayne said in Spanish.

"What? I don't speak Spanish."

"Manager, please," Shayne said in a heavy Spanish accent, and added a stream of unintelligible Spanish.

Inside the room Gerald Hawkes swore and Shayne heard steps coming to the door. The door was unlocked. The steps retreated.

"Come on in, then. Enter."

Shayne opened the door and stepped into the room. He closed the door behind him. Gerald was bent again over the wash basin. He groped for the towel, dried his face, and looked up. His Florida tan seemed to change color when he saw Shayne. The red-head was obviously not the manager or clerk of the *Casa Verde*.

Shayne grinned. "Hello, Gerald. Greetings from Miami."

Gerald Hawkes just stood there, gaping.

IX

MIKE SHAYNE strode across the incredibly dirty and dilapidated room and sat in something that passed for a chair. Roaches scuttled across the floor. The window of the room faced a wall. There was a single feeble light dangling from a cord. An oil lamp showed that even the one light was not reliable.

Mike Shayne leaned back and watched the nephew.

Gerald found his voice. "Who are you?"

"The name is Shayne, Mike Shayne."

"Police?"

"Private," Shayne said.

"She sent you?"

Shayne nodded. "She doesn't like being robbed."

"Who does?" Gerald said calmly.

Shayne watched the absconding nephew. There was something subtly different about Gerald. He looked like his picture, but there was that about him that did not fit the impression Shayne had gotten. It was hard to pin down, but Shayne felt that Gerald was bigger, stronger, looked more capable than he had expected.

It was a difference that explained Melody Dawn's loyalty, but not Gerald's association with two bums like Mort and Axel.

"Shall we get to business?" Shayne said.

"What kind of business? You have a warrant?" Gerald said.

"No, and you better hope I don't get one," Shayne said. "I could get one pretty fast now that I've found you."

"Could?" Gerald said.

"Great-aunt Bithiah wants her stones and her money, but she doesn't want you," Shayne said. "You're lucky you're a Hawkes. She says to let you off—no charges,

no police. Just give me the loot and I walk out of here alone. I don't even look back. With no loot on you, no one's going to work hard to find you."

"That's the deal?"

"That's it, and a damned good deal for you," Shayne said. "If it was up to me I'd drag you back by the hair."

"What makes you think I'll take any deal? I've got the jewels and the money and you don't."

Shayne grinned. "I will have."

"Not if I don't tell you."

"Look, sonny," Shayne said. "You got down here last night. You don't speak Spanish. You don't know the town. In a place like the *Casa Verde* even you'd have more sense than to let the stuff out of your sight. No, you didn't stash it, and you didn't hide it. You've got it in this room. All I have to do is look."

Shayne stood. Gerald made his try. The desperate nephew lunged across the room toward the bureau. It was a decrepit bureau, and even though Gerald reached it he could do nothing. The drawer stuck. By

the time he got it open Shayne was beside him.

Gerald Hawkes made a final attempt to grab the pistol in the drawer when he finally got it open. Shayne hit him once on the chin. Gerald went over like a pole-axed steer and skidded half way across the room. He lay there a moment. Then he sat up and shook his head.

"Do I look or do you tell me?" Shayne said.

"Maybe I sold them already," the bruised man said.

"No, you haven't had the time," Shayne said.

"Look," Gerald said desperately, "I'll split. Fifty-fifty. Half for you and half for me! That ought to be a pile for you, even if the fences do cheat us. How about it? Hell, it'd take you twenty years to make—"

Shayne sighed. "Okay, I was going to let you suffer, but if it makes it any easier I'll tell you. Half for you and half for me wouldn't leave us with the jet fare home. The stones are all fake."

Where he sat on the floor Gerald Hawkes started to smile. His eyes told Shayne to stop kidding. Sure, fun was fun, he liked a joke. It was a joke, wasn't it?

"She sold them a long time ago. One by one, probably, to keep going. Judge Harrings knows all about it."

"Fake?" Gerald said, still there on the floor. "No. Harrings would lie for her. Anyway, the old bastard has his eyes out for Melody Dawn. He hates me. Melody is coming down as soon as I tell her. No, they're not fake!"

"I've got a certified appraisal report, stone by stone," Shayne said. "You want to see it?"

"They can't be fake! Why would she send you?"

"She's a proud old bird. The settings are real. Anyway, that's the story. I guess she just doesn't want you to think you put one over on her."

"Fake?" Gerald said. Where he sat on the floor, a trickle of thin blood at the corner of his mouth, the man could not yet begin to believe it.

Shayne handed him the list. Gerald looked at it. The nephew read it very slowly, line by line. He read it again. Then he finally looked up at Shayne. He stood up and went to a table and lit a cigarette. It was the last one in a pack.

Gerald Hawkes crushed the pack as he smoked and looked at the crushed red paper and cellophane as if it were the last pack he would ever smoke.

"On the beach," Gerald said. "That's it, isn't it? She wants me stranded on the beach with nowhere to go and no hope."

"It's better than a Caracas jail, or even a Florida one," Shayne said.

Gerald seemed to be thinking if it really were better. He decided without too much trouble.

"Under the mattress, and I hope she dies slow!"

Shayne strode to the bed. He touched the mattress with diffident fingers. The bedbugs had left their marks. A large flat case was there. Shayne took it out and opened it. It contained a set of chess men. Shayne looked at Gerald.

"There's a secret catch on the left. I had it ready."

Shayne pressed the catch. The whole section, with the chess men, came out. The jewels were underneath. Shayne reached for the list Gerald still held. He checked the jewels. They were all there.

Shayne studied them. He could see why Gerald had been fooled, and everyone else. The stones were good fakes, and the gold and silver settings were beautiful—real fine work of the *ante-bellum* period. He could even see why the old lady wanted them back. They had an air about them, a sense of strength and history.

"Fake!" Gerald said. "That old bitch!"

"She's a smart one," Shayne said.

Gerald snarled now. "Okay, you got them. Now get out of here! You've got what you came for, you've seen where I am, now you can tell her she's won as usual! Tell her she's welcome to the glass and her beautiful son!"

Shayne held out his hand. "The money."

"Money?"

"What's left of the twelve hundred dollars plus?" the red-head said. "Give!"

Gerald started to crouch as if ready to fight. Shayne took a step toward him with his hand still out. Gerald saw Shayne's eyes.

"I don't like you, sonny, and I can still turn you in. Now hand over the money or do I have to do it the hard way?"

Gerald wilted completely. He went to the bureau and opened the bottom drawer. He fumbled under a pitiful pile of socks, underwear, and two shirts.

Shayne sighed. The damned fool couldn't even think of an original hiding place. In any decent hotel the chambermaid would have had the money and been ten states away.

The beaten man handed Shayne a sheaf of bills. Shayne counted them. He made a rapid mental calculation. Two hundred to Mort and Axel. The fare from Florida to New York. The fare from New York to Caracas. The room rent. Incidentals. One trip to the Big A perhaps. It was about right. It did not look like Gerald was holding out anything.

"Now you're clear," Shayne said.

"Why not take the pistol so I can't shoot myself and spoil her fun?" Gerald said bitterly.

"Don't cry to me, sonny," Shayne said, but he suddenly peeled off a twenty and handed it

back. "That'll hold you until you can start begging."

"Thanks for nothing," Gerald said.

Shayne left him sitting on the edge of the bed, staring at the roaches. The red-head went down to the lobby. He found a member of the *Casa Verde* staff and asked for the telephone.

The man did not seem to understand until Mike Shayne produced a dollar bill—one dollar American.

The man bowed him to the phone. Bribes came cheap in Caracas. He called the taxi number and went out into the street to wait. He had had enough of the smell and the clientele of the *Casa Verde*.

It was now twilight over Caracas. The streets were no less crowded and no cooler. But Shayne did not stand out so much. He held the case with the jewels, and his pocket was hot with the money. The taxi took its time and it was totally dark when the cab finally pulled up and took Shayne aboard.

The trip back was uneventful. Shayne went up to his hotel room. He washed the *Casa Verde* off with a hot shower, and then dressed in a change of clothes. He removed the false top from the case. As he closed it again he decided to leave the money in his room. No sense complicating matters. He put all his credentials in his pocket and called the Caracas police.

After a time he got through to a Captain Torres-Blanco who had a voice of authority. He explained that he had a police problem and would like to see the captain. Torres-Blanco said he would be delighted to have Senor Shayne call on him at once. Senor Shayne hung up and went out. He took another cab to police headquarters.

Captain Torres-Blanco turned out to be a small, peppery man in full military uniform who reminded Shayne a little of Miami Beach Chief of Detectives Peter Painter. Torres-Blanco was better mannered than Painter and listened to Shayne's story.

The red-head gave him an edited version, which, in essence, consisted of a family misunderstanding that necessitated Mike Shayne coming to get the jewels from the nephew. Torres-Blanco did not believe Shayne for a minute, but the captain was polite.

"A misunderstanding, Senor Shayne?"

"That's right. A sort of family squabble. The boy took the jewels to spite the old lady. They're only fakes." Shayne hoped he sounded convincing.

"Ah, I see. Merely a family argument."

"You've got it," Shayne said.

"Of course," Torres-Blanco said mildly. "May I see all your credentials?"

The captain nodded over Shayne's private license and pistol permit. He studied the authorization from Mrs. De Quincy Hawkes. He then checked the list against the jewels. Satisfied, Torres-Blanco then read the appraisal report. At this point the small Latin picked up the telephone and held a long conversation in local idiomatic Spanish that Shayne had trouble following. But he got the gist—Torres-Blanco was checking on the reliability and status of the Miami appraisal firm. Apparently it stood up.

The captain hung up. He then picked up the phone again and ordered a call to the Miami police. Shayne was sweating by now. He did not like all this caution. But Torres-Blanco did not wait for the call to come through.

"All seems to be in order, Senor Shayne. My information unit tells me that you are well known. I am pleased to meet you. Your authorization is clear. The attested appraisal is in order. The jewels check to the last piece of glass."

"Of course," Shayne said.

"Yes," Torres-Blanco said. "Now, let us get to the point. It is quite clear to me that these were stolen, probably in the illusion that they were real. They are very good fakes. You have come here and recovered them without our help, a matter we find distasteful. However, let that pass for now. You probably had your reasons, and you have correctly come to me."

The captain smiled. "A wise move, I might say. We let much more come in than we let get out. Then, of course, there are the American authorities at the other end. But you have done well. I will have the jewels sealed officially and you will be passed to have them opened in the presence of the New York police.

"But I must have the thief. I cannot allow you to let such a criminal go free in Venezuela. We are not lenient with thieves here, no matter where they did their thieving. We have treaties with the United States. I cannot have later repercussions. In addition, I do not want such a man loose in Caracas."

Shayne tugged on his earlobe. "Captain, I understand, but I don't think you quite get the picture. My client will press no charges. The man in question is not wanted in the States, since there is no charge. That takes care of your treaties. He is not a professional thief so I doubt if there will be later trouble with the States.

"What you do with him here is your business. I don't care about that. But my client does not want him charged with any crime connected to her. Captain, let me appeal to your sense of honor. Think if the thief was a member of your family. I'm sure you would not want him charged for an indiscretion?"

Torres-Blanco watched Shayne. The telephone rang. The captain listened carefully. When he hung up, Torres-Blanco shrugged.

"Very well, Senor Shayne. That was Miami. They vouch for you highly. They also agree that there is no warrant for this Gerald Hawkes. They have no knowledge of a theft. Family is family; I understand honor. I will not pursue the matter further. But I assure you that Mr. Hawkes will not find his stay here pleasant."

"That's okay with me. Just let me get on the jet before you move," Shayne said. "I don't want to know about it. You know where he is."

"Yes, I know," the small captain said.

After that there was no more trouble. Mike Shayne had a pang of pity for Gerald Hawkes; they did not treat vagrant Americans too well in Venezuela, but the pang passed. Gerald deserved what he got. Shayne had his jewels sealed in an official pouch, and returned to sleep in his hotel. The quickest way home was through New York.

He was on the morning jet with his work finished.

Or so he thought.

X

AT KENNEDY his old friend Lieutent Naudes of the New York Police was at Customs to greet him. The sealed pouch was opened in front of Naudes and a Custom officer, the jewels checked against the attested list, and Shayne was passed through. It was night, and Shayne decided to check into his hotel again and take the first jet in the morning to Miami.

In his room at the hotel Mike Shayne relaxed, lit a cigarette, and called Mrs. De Quincy Hawkes in Miami. The old lady was delighted.

"I said you knew your work," the dowager said. "How did he take it, Mr. Shayne?"

"He wasn't happy," Shayne said.

The old woman chuckled. "I imagine he wasn't. You, er, left the police out of it all as I instructed?"

"Mostly," Shayne said. "They had to know his name. They probably will pick him up and deport him for vagrancy."

There was a silence. "I see. Well, he deserves it. Now how much of my money did you recover?"

Shayne told her.

"And the jewels? They are all there?"

"To the last rhinestone," Shayne said. "I'll fly them down tomorrow."

There was another silence. "I suppose that is best."

"I need a good night's sleep," Shayne said.

"Of course," Mrs. De Quincy Hawkes said. "Well then, I shall

see you here tomorrow. Your check will be ready, plus the expenses, of course. You've done a good job, Mr. Shayne."

"Thanks," Shayne said.

He hung up and sat looking at the telephone thoughtfully. Mrs. De Quincy Hawkes had sounded somehow a little different. Gerald's humiliation did not seem to please her as much as Shayne had thought it would from his initial interview with her.

He lay on the bed, smoking his cigarette and thinking. It had all gone smoothly, exactly as he had expected. Everything was in order, except the man in the gray car. This bothered the detective. He did not like cases with loose ends. The grey car was definitely a very loose end.

All along there had been two red-herrings in the matter: Judge Harrings and the men with the grey car. Harrings could be explained by his September-May lust for Melody Dawn.

But what about the grey car and its men who watched *Pays Perdu?* They did not fit. There was no place in the case for them. Perhaps they had no connection at all, were there for some entirely different reason. Maybe they were simply thieves casing the mansion.

A coincidence?

Mike Shayne did not believe in coincidence. It bothered him when a piece did not fit. He was like a scientist who has a perfect theory that explains every observed fact except one. But that one fact is enough to destroy the whole theory. The grey car did not fit his picture of the case—then maybe his picture of the whole case was wrong.

But what other picture was there? Only the grey car did not fit the facts. One fact did not always destroy a theory. But it bothered Shayne. He got up and went out for dinner and to think. On his way out he checked the jewels in the hotel safe.

He decided to walk in the clear New York night. Walking helped him think. Tonight it did not help. He reached his favorite New York Spanish restaurant without any progress.

Over his *paella* he retraced the case step by step. He followed Foxy Charles, Mort and Axel, Melody Dawn and Paul Reston to the *Casa Verde* and Gerald. He could find no flaw and nothing suspicious in the trail. Harrings had been fishing for information about Melody.

Shayne recalled his slight surprise when he finally cornered Gerald, the impression that the nephew was not quite what Mrs. De Quincy Hawkes had said. But it was a minor discrepancy.

But he still did not like the grey car. He had an uneasy feeling that the case was not ended. Over his demi-tasse and brandy Shayne tried to think of just what his feelings could add up to, but nothing seemed clear. It was just a subcon-

scious apprehension based on something he sensed but could not actually bring to mind.

He decided to call Tim Rourke and see if the lean reporter had learned anything about the man in the grey car. Maybe that would make his uneasy feeling click. He realized that it had been his talk with the old lady that had started the feeling—and yet deep down something had bothered him all along.

Shayne returned to his hotel. It was late, but not too late for Rourke. The elongated reporter was a night owl. Shayne called from his room and found that the reporter was out on a story. He left the hotel number and lay down to wait. Then he called room service and had a bottle of Martel sent up. At his ease he sipped his brandy and read the newspaper.

The call came just after midnight.

"Hello, Mike. How did it go?" Rourke asked.

"Smooth as silk. How about you?" Shayne said.

"Well, I think I've got your boy. According to some of my sources, no names mentioned, the boy with the limp and the grey car is Fred 'Doc' Berger. The Doc is a pretty good-sized fence! He specializes in 'hot' stones!"

Shayne tugged hard on his earlobe. "A fence? You're sure?"

"Pretty sure. My sources describe him pretty close. I've got everyone with an eye out for him, but so far he doesn't seem to be around."

"A fence," Shayne said almost to himself as he pulled furiously on his earlobe.

Rourke was serious. "You think maybe the old lady was conning you? The stones are real after all? Maybe she figured if anyone knew the stones were real the cops would have to get in on it. Or maybe she was afraid if anyone knew, she'd never get them back."

"Maybe on both counts," Shayne said. "I'll tell you one thing, if they were real the Caracas police would never have let me get out without charging Gerald. Maybe they'd never have let the stones go: that much money is tempting. Only—"

"Only what, Mike?"

"Only that attested list couldn't be faked. There's no doubt the jewels Gerald stole were fakes, Tim."

"Then what would Doc Berger want at the mansion?" Rourke said.

"I don't know," Shayne said. "But I've got a hunch I'll find out. Keep an eye out for Berger, Tim. Maybe you better get in touch with Will Gentry and see if Berger can be found by the police."

"Will do, Mike," Rourke said.

After he hung up, Shayne sat in thought for a time and sipped his brandy. Then he picked up the telephone again, called Lucy Hamilton at her home. His secretary answered sleepily. But she was ac-

customed to such calls and woke up the instant she heard Shayne's voice.

"Yes, Michael. Where are you?"

"In New York, Angel. Now listen. Did our stake-out at Melody Dawn have any results?"

"Nothing, Michael. The report so far shows no letters, no attempt to contact her. Except that Judge Harrings was hanging around her, the old goat!"

"Okay, Angel. Thanks and go back to sleep. I'll be down in the morning."

Shayne hung up and lay back on the bed. A fence! Why? Could it be just a coincidence? Doc Berger just out to rob the mansion, unaware that Gerald Hawkes had beaten him to it? It was a logical explanation—but Shayne just didn't like coincidence. All his experience was against it.

He went over the whole case again. He came up with nothing. He was as sure as anyone could be that the jewels Gerald lifted were fake. Then—

At one o'clock Shayne gave it up and went to bed. He did not go to sleep right away, but tossed uneasily with a hidden thought that would not come. A fence with at least one accomplice casing *Pays Perdu*. A fence and a friend. A fence casing the mansion . . . a fence . . .

Mike Shayne awoke, instantly alert.

He reached for his pistol.

He had heard the sound in the hall just outside his door.

The shots rang out before he even got his hand on his pistol.

Something crashed against his door.

Shayne leaped out of bed, pistol in hand. He ran to his door and opened it. The body fell across his threshhold, where it had been slumped against the door. Shayne jumped over the fallen man and looked up and down the hall. People were coming from their rooms. Shayne saw no sign of any killer. He turned back and bent down over the dead man.

The man was very dead—shot twice in the chest at close range. The man held a pistol in his hand

as if he had tried to defend himself at the last minute. Shayne stood up and looked down at the body.

It was the body of Gerald Hawkes!

XI

MIKE SHAYNE tugged hard on his left earlobe. Gerald Hawkes! In New York? How and why? He had left the nephew in Caracas broke and with the police ready to pick him up. Obviously Gerald had not been broke, and had not waited for any police. He had followed Shayne back to New York. For fake jewels?

Suddenly the red-head felt the click in his brain and the whole picture fell into place! A new picture that fitted all the facts. The jewels were real! Not the jewels that Gerald had stolen from the old lady; those were fakes, as the attested list said—*but the jewels that had been substituted for the fakes in Caracas!*

There it was! It had to be! The jewels Gerald stole were fake, but the jewels Mike Shayne had carried safely back to New York were real! He, Shayne, had been used as the carrier of half a million in real jewels! He had brought them in, and it was a one hundred-to-one that the real jewels were stolen jewels! The whole deal was a plan to have the stones brought safely into the country!

Smooth! The whole case had gone so smoothly, too smoothly. Now Shayne knew what he had been feeling uneasy about. It had been too easy. The trail that led him straight to Caracas.

Gerald Hawkes had simply left a clear trail—on purpose. Gerald had had that fake chess-case all ready! Now Shayne realized that the nephew had given in too easily there at the *Casa Verde*. The whole thing had been a set-up.

But who had set it up, and who had killed Gerald? Shayne whirled to dress. Only a few minutes later, when he was dressed, did he see the looks in the eyes of the people in the hallway.

The hotel manager was there now. Shayne could hear sirens. And he realized that he had been standing over the dead body of Gerald Hawkes with a pistol in his hand.

He was not worried that there would be trouble, but he would be held up, and he wanted to move fast now. He needed proof of his theory, and he had an idea where he could get it. He also had a hunch what Gerald had been doing outside his door. The nephew had come to get the jewels back now that Mike Shayne had brought them into the country.

He needed time to prove that, too.

Quickly he pushed through the crowd in the hall and headed for the stairs. The manager shouted at him. Shayne broke into a run and

was through the door and down the stairs.

Two flights down he left the stairs and moved quickly to the corridor. Here he instantly caught an elevator down to the lobby. He strode across the lobby and out just as the police arrived at the hotel.

In the street Shayne hailed a taxi. A thin dawn was just beginning to break over the city as the taxi drove south to North Bank Street.

Shayne paid the cabbie at the corner of North Bank Street and walked quickly to Number 124. He used his special ring of keys again, and went up the stairs at a run. He stopped in front of Apartment 8. There was no sound inside. With a powerful kick, the detective opened the door.

He jumped into the room.

The muscular Paul Reston rose out of bed like a charging bull. Shayne sidestepped and hit Reston full in the face. The stocky muscle man staggered but did not go down. He came on again, flailing like a windmill.

Shayne grinned. Reston was muscle bound. Shayne blocked and shot a straight right. Reston went down. Shayne stood over him.

"Okay, Reston, I want an answer—how much did Gerald pay you to make sure I knew he was in Caracas?"

"Go to hell," Reston said. The muscular man rubbed his jaw.

"Listen, punk, this is murder now! Gerald is dead, shot! I wouldn't put it past you to have shot him for the loot yourself. You're no fool, you—"

Reston blinked, went white. "Dead? Gerald's dead?"

"He was shot," Shayne said. "You have a gun?"

Reston struggled up. "You can't pin it on me! I never saw him after he left for Caracas."

"Okay, then I'll help you. Now you tell me how much he paid you to make sure I followed him."

Reston shrugged. "Two hundred. He said to just make sure you knew where he was, but to make it look like you got it out of me."

Shayne rubbed his chin. There it was. The proof. The whole thing had been a set-up! But who set it up, and who killed Gerald?

"Write it down and sign it!" Shayne gave him paper and a fountain pen.

Reston wrote it down and signed it.

"Now stay put. The cops'll want you," Shayne said.

The red-head turned and left the apartment. In the street again, the morning now brightening to the east, he stopped to think. Gerald's murder had all the signs of a double-cross. He thought again of the grey car, Doc Berger, and the unknown man who had slugged him.

Now the actions of Doc Berger made some sense. Obviously the fence and his accomplice knew the whole scheme and had been watch-

ing the house for some reason of their own.

Shayne had a hunch what it was —to get the real jewels for themselves. They just hadn't known the exact timetable!

Gerald had tried to get the jewels from Shayne, and someone had come either with him or after him. But who? Someone who had known the scheme, had known that Gerald was going to try for the rocks himself, and who wanted the jewels and did not want Gerald to get them.

Shayne had a hunch, but he did not have much time. Somehow, he had to smoke them out. He did not think that Gerald had been in this alone, and Gerald had failed to get the jewels.

At the corner Shayne hailed a taxi and went back to his hotel. He saw the police cars. Shayne walked boldly into the lobby and straight to the office of the manager. As he had expected, the police were there, the safe was open, and the jewels were on the desk.

As he had also expected, the detective in charge was his friend Lieutenant Naudes.

"You looking for me?" Shayne said as he walked in.

"That's him!" the manager cried.

Naudes nodded. "What about it, Mike?"

Shayne strode to the desk and explained the situation in short, hard sentences. Naudes listened.

"So they're real?"

"It has to be," Shayne said. "My hunch is that if you check out each stone one by one you'll find that they're all stolen. Maybe over a period of years. This is no fly by-night scheme. I figure they got the stolen rocks together and set up the plan to replace the fakes and get some sucker, namely me, to bring them in."

"Okay, Mike, we can start checking them out," Naudes said.

"Later, Lieutenant. Look, we've got a killing. My hunch is that it's all some sort of double-cross. Now I don't want them to have any time to think. I figure whoever killed Gerald has to try for the stones himself. So I want you to let me take them down to Miami."

Naudes frowned. "Well—"

"Look, just twenty-four hours. Put out a fast story that you have released the stones to me, that you're looking for the killer. Say you're cooperating with the Miami police because it's their case. Okay?"

"You think he'll try to get them?"

"Unless he has too much time to think," Shayne said. "I want it to move fast."

"You're setting yourself up, Mike."

Shayne nodded. "I figure it's the quickest way. Okay?"

"Well, okay," Naudes said reluctantly. "But you don't need the real jewels. We—"

"No, the real stones!" Shayne

said. "I've got to flash them. I've got a pretty good hunch I'll be watched, and I don't know for sure who I'm after."

Naudes agreed. "But remember, we get the killer. It was done up here."

"The killer is all yours as far as I'm concerned."

Shayne took the case and the jewels and left. He went up to his room. He packed and checked out. He made sure he was easily seen. Just as he got into a taxi to go to Kennedy he saw a dark-skinned young man watching him. He gave the destination very loudly. As he drove off he looked behind. The dark young man was getting into another taxi!

At Kennedy Shayne strode straight to the reservation desk. He validated his ticket. Then he called for an airlines official. When the official came, Shayne opened the case and showed the jewels and requested that they be locked in the pilot's cabin for the flight. This was arranged. Shayne closed the case. He saw the dark young man only a few feet away, very interested in the departing flight schedule.

Shayne went to the loading area. He saw no more of the dark young man. He gave the case into the keeping of the pilot and got aboard.

The jet took off into the sun soon after. The flight was uneventful. Shayne walked up and down the aisle, but the dark young man was not aboard. The red-head tugged slowly on his left earlobe. Had he been wrong?

At Miami airport he claimed his case and strode out to the parking area where he had left his car. He got in and drove straight to his office. Arriving, he parked in the garage and took the elevator up to his office.

As he opened the outer door he sensed at once that something was wrong. The red-head grinned. It had worked!

Despite the afternoon hour, Lucy Hamilton was not at her desk. There was a note on the desk of his brown-eyed secretary that said she had stepped out for a moment and would be right back if Mike showed up. The note seemed legitimate enough—but it wasn't. By long agreement Lucy never left such a note if she had to leave the office untended. She simply took the flower out of her bud vase and that meant she had gone out legitimately.

The flower was still in the vase.

And Lucy never called him "Mike" in writing or in speech. It was her way of saying there was danger. With the flower it told Shayne that someone was in his private office and had Lucy with him. It was not the first time, and it would not be the last.

Lucy Hamilton would be ready. The intruder would not be ready. Especially this one who did not want trouble but only a case of jewels.

Shayne had his automatic in hand. He stood outside his office door. Then he leaped.

The rest all happened at once.

Shayne flew in the door in a diving leap, almost parallel to the floor. He jacknifed in the air, his automatic covering the startled man who stood across the office partly behind the door. His leap carried him, in a rolling tumble, behind his desk.

In the instant of the door bursting open, Lucy Hamilton dropped like a stone to the floor.

The intruder swore, raised his own pistol, swung it toward the flying Mike Shayne. But he was too late.

With Lucy Hamilton dropping so suddenly, the man stood exposed and frozen by surprise with nothing to shoot at.

Shayne covered him from the shelter of the desk.

"Drop it, friend," Shayne said bluntly.

The man hesitated.

"Don't even think about it," Shayne said. "I've got you dead."

The man dropped the pistol and raised his hands. Shayne stood up and grinned at the man.

"Well, well! Doc Berger, I presume?"

The tall man only glared at Shayne.

"Okay, Doc," Shayne said, "let's talk. Lucy, dust yourself off and take notes. The Doc and I are going to have a nice chat."

Doc Berger swore, but his eyes were not happy.

XII

THE OFFICE of Miami Police Chief Will Gentry was large and sunny. The gathered people sat or stood in uneasy silence. Gentry sat behind his desk and looked at Shayne as the gaunt red-head nodded to Doc Berger, who sat handcuffed in a chair.

"The Doc told it straight and clear," Shayne said, his glance taking in Will Gentry and all the others in the room.

The others were all there by order of Chief Gentry—on the request of Mike Shayne. Mrs. Bithiah De Quincy Hawkes sat in the only comfortable chair Will Gentry allowed in his office. The old lady was furious at being forced to come to Miami. "And to a grubby police station! Ridiculous!" but she had come.

In a straight chair beside her was Hazel Manning, tall and imposing and looking like she would enjoy getting her hands on Mike Shayne.

Shayne nodded to Mrs. Hawkes. "The jewels were fakes all right, when Gerald took them. Only Gerald didn't really take them the way it seemed. He knew they were fakes. It was all a set-up to get me, or some other private detective, I suppose, to go after the stones and unknowingly bring in a fortune in real gems.

"It wasn't the first time the scheme had been used by Gerald and his boss. Berger says Gerald told him it had worked many times before, no trouble and no problems."

Shayne let his eyes glance around at the others again. Melody Dawn was perched on the edge of a straight chair, looking so good Shayne almost wished this wasn't business and he and Melody were alone. Quincy Frazer stood against the wall, unaware of anything except Melody Dawn. The feeble and girlish grandson of the old lady stared at the beautiful stripper with his jaw hanging down a foot.

Judge Harrings watched Melody and the staring boy with a furious hatred in his hot eyes. The judge had protested louder than anyone at the summons, but Will Gentry had had a private talk with Harrings and the judge was now meek as a lamb, except when he saw any man looking at Melody. Melody herself looked at the judge as if the old man wasn't even there.

Mort and Axel sat on a hard wooden bench like two bookends. They were scared by the thought of a police station. The office of the Chief had them totally paralyzed. Only their eyes moved, like marbles out of control.

"The set-up was simple. Gerald Hawkes made like a thief. I got the call and went after him. He left a trail it took some work to find so as not to make it too easy. Like a train ride from station to station: Foxy Charles, Mort and Axel, Melody, and at last Reston. Gerald just left the right words with them all and let me work it out. If I hadn't been good enough, Gerald had some ways to make it easier.

"Only Reston was sort of in on it, because he was the big clue. I had to be sent to Caracas. It all worked like a charm and Gerald let me take the supposedly fake jewels. The money was just window-dressing, of course. It made it all seem more real."

Will Gentry chewed on his cigar. "And all the stones in the pieces you brought back from Caracas were real. I got the list from New York an hour ago. Not all of them yet, but enough. It seems they were all stolen rocks, stolen over a period of years and from different places. All taken out of their settings and re-set in Mrs. Hawkes' pieces."

The old lady was furious. "In my jewels! Can you imagine! I'll say one thing, though. I had no idea Gerald had that much intelligence. Perhaps if I'd known he wouldn't —" Mrs. De Quincy Hawkes broke off.

Shayne nodded slowly to her. "That was the whole scheme. Stolen jewels, gathered over a period of years, and all set in Mrs. Hawkes family settings. Naturally, the key was knowing that Mrs. Hawkes real jewels were fakes. It was a pretty good scheme. Once in this coun-

try the stones would have been resold one by one. Only this time it went wrong."

Shayne looked at Doc Berger. "This time Gerald decided to double-cross his boss. He got in touch with Berger there. Berger agreed to work with him and fence the stuff after Gerald got it. Berger has some boys, and they were in on it too. Berger didn't trust Gerald all the way, so he kept a watch on the mansion, and he had his boys watch in New York.

"After I got the jewels into the country, Gerald followed to steal them back from me. Only his boss had somehow tumbled to the whole scheme. I don't know how, maybe by spotting Berger, but the boss came up to New York and when Gerald came after me he was killed.

"The rest you know, Will. Berger and his boys heard that Gerald was dead, they didn't have the jewels. They saw me take them to the jet and Berger made his attempt in my office to get them. He failed, and here we are. We know the whole scheme."

There was a silence in the office. Everyone looked dismayed. It was Will Gentry who asked the question they all knew was hovering there in the silence of the office.

"You're saying that Berger didn't kill Gerald?" Gentry said. "Then who did?"

"His boss, of course, Will. The one who set up the whole scheme, who's been operating such schemes, and probably a lot of other tricks, for years."

Gentry chewed on his cigar. "Don't play games, Mike. Who is it?"

Shayne shrugged. "You remember that case I had of the Moghul Box? It was a lot like this one. The key is that the killer killed Gerald Hawkes but made no attempt to get the jewels herself. See? She knew that all she had to do was stop Gerald. The stones would automatically come to her."

Shayne looked at Mrs. Bithiah De Quincy Hawkes. "I don't know how you found out about the double-cross, but once you did you had to kill Gerald, didn't you?"

Mrs. Hawkes stared and then laughed. "What a ridiculous idea! Why, I never—"

Shayne shook his head. "No, once we knew the scheme it could only be you, Mrs. Hawkes. No one else had real access to the jewels once they got back here."

"Judge Harrings and Hazel Manning have access!" the old lady cried. "They could easily get them!"

"How?" Shayne said. "You said yourself you keep them in your room! The stones weren't sold all at once. It would have to be done slowly, over a long time. How could Judge Harrings and Miss Manning do that with you holding the jewels? Besides, I know that Judge Harrings never left Miami!"

The old lady shouted, "Then it was Manning! She's the mastermind. Did you know she has a record? She does, just like Gerald! They were in on it together! She called Gerald just last night! I heard her!"

"Why you old—" Hazel Manning began. Then she stopped, her cold eyes studying the old lady.

Shayne said, "It's murder now, Miss Manning. Maybe murder and accessory before the fact, and you know what that means."

Hazel Manning stood up. She towered in the room. She stared stonily at Mrs. Bithiah De Quincy Hawkes. When she spoke her voice was cold.

"She's been doing it for years. The grand old lady. I don't know when or how it started, probably a long time ago, when she had to have money. Her father and husband left her nothing at all. So she started stealing and selling. She passed out the myth of cash being left."

"That's why she won't use banks," Shayne said. "She really lives on all kinds of stolen goods."

Manning nodded. "She had a lot of help all along from her old retainers. But she got greedy and branched out. Like she said, I've got a record. She needed some expert advice and some muscle, so she hired me to play secretary.

"Then she got this fake jewel scheme and brought Gerald in. Only like you said, he got greedier than her. She guessed when I called Caracas to make sure the deal had gone right—and Gerald wasn't there! He was supposed to be there.

"The old lady was crazy wild!" Manning looked at Mrs. Hawkes. "When I told her she said she knew Gerald was up to some trick. She said she'd stop him!"

"Lies!" the old lady screamed. "A pack of lies! I don't know anything about it! It was her! Gerald and her! They fooled me! Then she killed him!"

Manning clenched her fists. "Don't you pin a murder on me, you old bitch! I didn't even know you'd gone to New York! I knew nothing about any killing!"

"Hah!" the old lady crowed, triumphant. "New York, you say! Well I didn't go to New York and you can't prove I did! You hear? I was in my room all last night after Shayne called! You said New York, you muscle-bound monster! You went to New York."

Manning stepped toward the old lady. Mrs. Hawkes glared up without flinching, her eyes snapping hate and fire. Then a voice suddenly filled the office. A light, almost delicate voice.

"No," Quincy Frazer said. "No, you weren't at home!"

The girlish face of the grandson was a picture of satanic delight. Quincy's eyes were brilliant with a kind of macabre joy as he looked now at his grandmother. All the hate of his life poured out.

"You weren't home! I know! I can prove it!"

"Shut up, you butterfly!" Mrs. Hawkes shouted.

"No!" Quincy laughed. "She wasn't home! She left as soon as Shayne called! I saw her! She called a private flyer she knows. He operates a small jet. She's used it before! His name is Bolon, Dan Bolon! She didn't get back until morning! I saw her come in!"

"You stupid fool!" the old lady cried.

Quincy's eyes were bright. "No! All my life you've pushed me, laughed at me, sneered at me! And all the time you were a thief! A crook! A murderer! The noble old lady of the aristocracy! You're nothing! Nothing! You'll rot in prison while I live my life the way—"

The shot rang out like a cannon in the room. The old lady held the small smoking pistol that she had taken from somewhere deep in the folds of her old-fashioned dress.

Quincy Frazer went over backwards.

The pistol turned toward Mike Shayne.

Hazel Manning was quicker. The strong hand of the giant of a woman clamped on the old lady's wrist and the gun dropped. Will Gentry bent over Quincy Frazer.

Gentry looked up. "Dead." He was shocked.

"He should have been destroyed at birth like a sick dog," Mrs. Bithiah De Quincy Hawkes said. "Gerald, Quincy, all of them. Degenerate dogs, weak and useless. They deserved to die."

Everyone in the now silent room stared at the old lady. Will Gentry looked at Shayne. His eyes said that the old lady was crazy. She saw the look.

"No, I'm not crazy! Don't you dare. I made a mistake. The only mistake I ever made."

"It's always a mistake to kill and steal," Gentry said sternly.

The old lady shrugged. "The end justifies the means. No, I made only one mistake. I hired the wrong private detective!"

She stared up at Shayne. The gaunt red-head looked down at her. He felt a little sick. She had just killed her grandson—and she was as sane as anyone on earth.

Mike Shayne turned away. "It's all yours, Will. I'll be available, and you can get Reston and the stones from New York. I'm going out and get drunk."

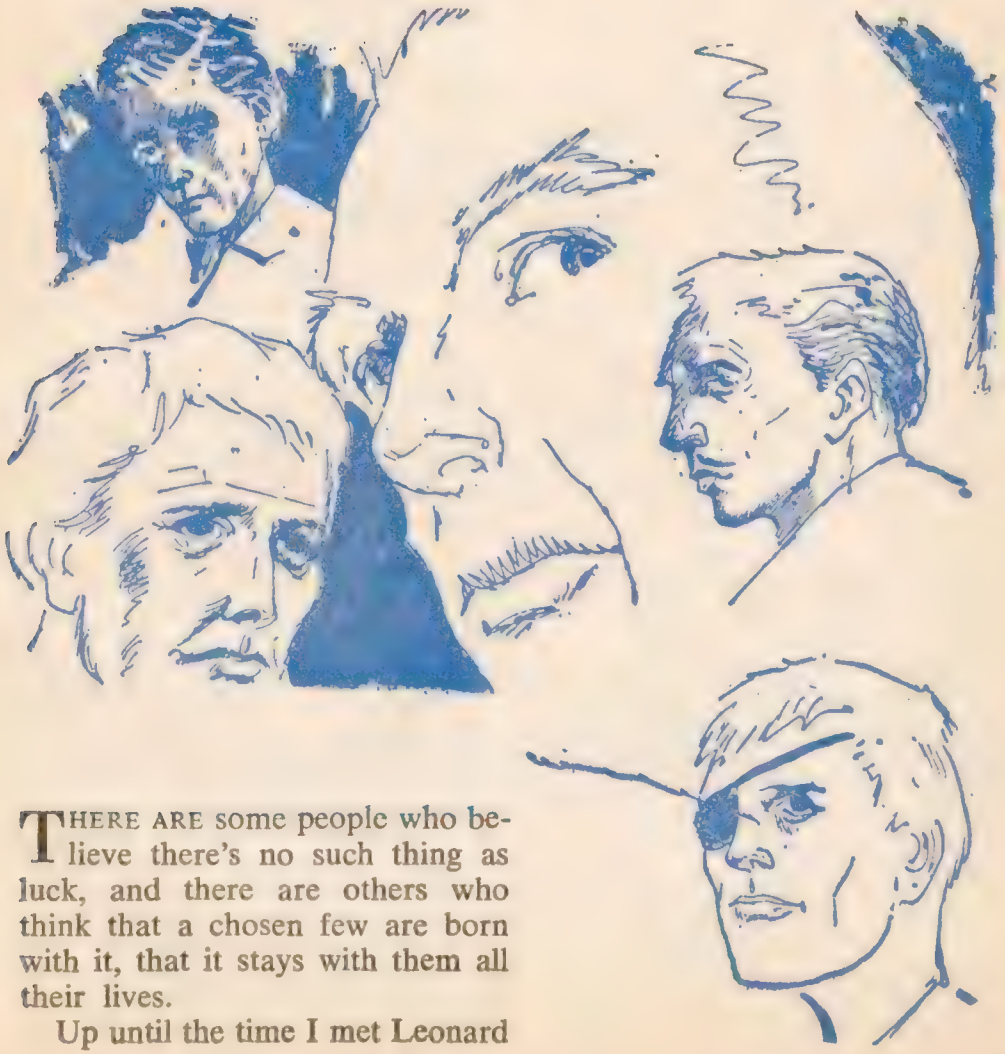
It would take a lot of drinks, he decided grimly, to wash the taste of Mrs. Hawkes out of his brain.

THE ONLY MAGAZINE featuring MIKE SHAYNE every month

LUCKY LENNIE

Lady Luck was his slave, and Lucky Lennie could not lose. But then one fine day she jilted him . . .

by RICHARD HILL WILKINSON



THERE ARE some people who believe there's no such thing as luck, and there are others who think that a chosen few are born with it, that it stays with them all their lives.

Up until the time I met Leonard

Latigo I included myself in the group of non-believers. Lucky Lennie, they called him. His specialty was sticking up liquor stores, and he was good at it. He would case a joint until he was thoroughly familiar with the activities and behavior patterns of the clerk or clerks, and until he knew the exact location and approximate amount of the loot.

Lucky Lennie wore a series of disguises, ranging from a trim false moustache or a false nose, buck teeth or a patch over one eye, to ears that stuck out at an almost horizontal angle.

He wore the disguises even when he was casing a joint, and since most of the time he was either casing, sticking up the joint or making his getaway, there were few of us who knew what Lucky Lennie looked like in the raw, so to speak.

Yes, Lucky Lennie was clever and a smooth operator, but his good luck was monstrous. For example, there was the time he stepped out of a liquor store, his pockets bulging with cash, just as a police car swung in at the curb.

Lennie didn't see how the liquor store owner could have summoned the cops so quickly, but he wasn't taking any chances.

He told a friend later, "I took off up the street at a gallop, ducked into an alley and came to the spot where I'd stashed my car. Then I got behind the wheel, at the same time removing the false moustache, eyebrows and big ears I was wearing. These I heaved toward an ash can.

"I figured I had about thirty seconds before the lights of the police car speared down the alley, so I gunned my sedan toward the mouth of the alley, slowed and eased into the street. I was somewhat worried because my rear view mirror hadn't picked up the headlights of the pursuing police car. It had certainly had time to turn around and set out after me."

His apprehension turned to sudden panic when he discovered that the cops had continued on around the block and were waiting for him at the mouth of the alley.

There was no turning back. There was only one course open, and Lennie took it. He floored his accelerator and went screeching up the street. The police car cut open its siren and followed in hot pursuit.

It occurred to Lennie that his chances of escape were slim. If he kept on going the cops would start shooting. The skin at the back of his neck crawled at the thought. In a blinding flash of good judgment he decided to haul up and call it quits.

At the moment he was racing across an intersection. From the corner of his eye he saw blinking red lights charging down on him. A fire truck! But why couldn't he hear its siren? In a flash he knew. The police car's siren was drowning it

out. And if he couldn't hear the wail of the fire truck, surely the cops couldn't either.

Lennie had started to ease up on his accelerator. Now he jammed it back to the floor. He kept his eyes glued to the rear view mirror. Two seconds later the fire truck and the police car reached the intersection at the same moment. There was the loudest and most satisfying crash that Lennie had ever heard.

Luck, that's what it was. Just plain damn fool luck.

Good luck haunted the guy. There was the time the newly installed alarm system shorted out in the L Street store when the owner, in a moment of desperate bravery, dropped beneath the counter and pushed the button. Lennie thought the guy had fainted and got out of there, never knowing that his good luck had saved him again.

There was the time he ran through a red light and was stopped by a police car. Two cops got out and one of them asked to see his license. Lennie was reaching for it when the second cop observed that the light at the corner appeared to be stuck.

"I waited there five minutes," Lennie said, thinking on his feet, or on the seat of his pants, "and the lights didn't change. I figured it was stuck so I came on through."

I could go on for pages giving examples of Lennie's good luck, but it would only serve to emphasize what I've already pointed out. Lennie's compatriots all admired and respected his daring, but they knew that luck played an important part in his success. Lennie knew it too, and after awhile he began to depend upon it.

He became ambitious, and planned a big job, one that would net him enough to retire if he wanted to. He had about decided to quit the liquor store route anyhow. The takes were getting smaller and smaller as word of Lennie's successes spread and owners began cutting down on the amount of cash they kept on hand. Besides, the risks were becoming greater. Cops were covering the area in which Lennie worked in staggered patrols.

So Lennie decided to hit a bank. In broad daylight. He couldn't see that banks were any different from liquor stores, except that there would be more people around. And people were like sheep when they found themselves staring down the barrel of a gun.

So Lennie cased the Grand First National, studying the behavior patterns of the employees and the general operation of the bank's entire personnel. There was only one guard, a white-haired, rosy-cheeked old man with a bulging waist line. Nevertheless, Lennie watched him covertly, noting that at certain times he stood here and at certain times he stood there. He followed a pattern as exacting as the hands on the ornate electric

clock that was attached to the wall above the cashier's desk.

Having satisfied himself as to the exact location of the guard at the time he planned his heist, Lennie concentrated his attention on the teller who would be the recipient of the note he planned to write. He settled on a buxom blonde woman of about thirty, who seemed capable and efficient and had a no-nonsense attitude. He didn't want one of those timid young things who would be sure to panic or perhaps faint.

The Grand First National was located on the corner of 10th Avenue and Carson Way, with doors opening on both streets. The blonde's window was directly opposite the Carson Way entrance. Outside, for a matter of fifty feet or more, the curbing was painted green.

This meant that fifteen minute parking was allowed.

Lennie decided that the time to make his move was 11:55. At that moment the bank guard would be standing near the Tenth Street entrance, ostensibly to screen the usual noon hour rush as customers came through the door.

Lennie planned to arrive at the green parking zone at 11:45. He knew that with his never-failing luck there would be an empty spot ready and waiting for him. He'd sit there behind the wheel, studying some papers and doing some figuring, quite like any business man who was checking some papers before entering the bank.

His disguise this time would be a clipped moustache and a pair of slightly tinted glasses. He would be wearing a neat blue suit and a smart felt hat, and would be carrying an attache case.

At 11:54 he would walk purposefully into the bank.

That afternoon Lennie purchased a red envelope of heavy manila similar to those he had seen merchants and business men carrying who came to the bank to make deposits or withdrawals. And that night he carefully printed the note that he would hand to the blonde the next day.

It read: "This is a stick-up. Be smart and you won't get hurt. Place all of your large bills in the red envelope. Keep smiling and talking while doing this. There is a gun beneath the newspaper in my left hand."

He liked the "keep smiling and talking" touch. He bet that not many stick-up artists had ever thought of it.

Lennie's luck held. There was a parking space waiting for him along the green stripe in front of the bank when he arrived the next morning. He edged into the curb, switched off the ignition, opened the attache case and took out a sheaf of papers and a pencil. For the next nine minutes he looked the picture of a bank customer checking over some figures before entering the bank.

At 11:54 Lennie returned the papers to the attache case, snapped it shut, picked up the manila envelope and the newspaper and walked briskly into the bank. He left the car keys in the ignition switch.

Luck again. A lone customer was just leaving the window behind which the blonde stood. A glance told Lennie that the rotund guard had strolled over to the Tenth Avenue entrance and had taken up his post there.

Smiling pleasantly, Lennie strolled up to the blonde's window, spoke a cheery good morning and handed her the note. She hesitated for a moment, then picked up the note and read it through twice. Lennie saw that she had paled a little, and for a moment he thought she might panic. Instead, her lips parted slightly and her eyes darted toward the newspaper Lennie was holding in his left hand and which he had casually placed on the edge of the counter.

"I'm not kidding," said Lennie pleasantly, and lifted the fold of the newspaper enough so that she could see the barrel of the gun. "Now do as the note says," he continued. "Also, I'd advise you to smile and to begin talking to me in a pleasant tone of voice."

The blonde picked up the envelope and began filling it with bills. She smiled.

"You won't get away with this, young man," she remarked in a voice equal to Lennie's in pleasant casualness. "There are three plain-clothes officers in the bank right now. One of them is watching you."

"Indeed," said Lennie with a light laugh. "It may interest you to know that I have been casing this bank for the past two weeks. I happen to know that the only officer you have on duty around here is that comic Santa Claus who is stupidly standing at the Tenth Avenue entrance right now. . . . That will be enough, thank you. Fasten the envelope and hand it to me."

The blonde did as she was told. "Very well, and good luck to you, Mr. Bank Robber. You're going to need it."

"Thank you," said Lennie, still smiling. "And I must warn you that if you sound an alarm before I get through that door, I'll blow that pretty blonde head right off your shoulders."

Lennie tucked the envelope under his arm and turned away.

Now, you have probably heard it said that a lucky man's luck sometimes plays out. Lennie's did. Right then and there.

The man he saw coming toward him was indeed a plain-clothes officer. Lennie knew this because of the steely expression on the man's face, and because at the moment he was drawing a gun from a shoulder holster.

If Lennie had had time to think he probably wouldn't have acted as

he did. But Lennie didn't have time to think. He had failed to prepare for this contingency. The only thing that flashed across his mind was a picture of himself in a cold prison cell instead of sitting in the shade of a palm tree on the golden sands of Miami Beach.

He suddenly realized that his luck had run out, and the realization shook him to the soles of his expensive shoes. His mind went blank and he acted on impulse. He raised the hand containing the newspaper with the gun beneath it.

There was a flash and an explosion and Lennie suddenly found himself staring down at the prone body of the plain-clothes officer. Blood was seeping from a wound in the officer's head.

A lot of things happened in the next few minutes. There was a lot of screaming and yelling and the sounds of people moving about as fast as they could. Lennie still didn't act as he might have if he had worked the thing out in his mind beforehand. Instead, he panicked. He whirled around—and crashed into something round and protruding and solid. The something was the rotund stomach of the comic Santa Claus who had crossed the floor of the bank with surprising speed and agility.

Lennie found his arm clasped in a vice like grip. The arm was inexorably twisted until Lennie, unable to stand the pain longer, uttered a scream of anguish and let the gun fall from his fingers. Immediately his arm was whipped up behind him toward the region of his shoulder blades, and Lennie was rendered helpless.

Yes, it seemed that Lucky Lennie's luck had run out. The plain-clothes officer was dead on arrival at the hospital. Lennie was charged with first degree murder, tried and convicted.

Of course he appealed, but it didn't do him any good. Cop killers seldom win appeals. And so he was sentenced to die in the electric chair. The date for his execution was set.

Most of us felt bad about Lennie. He wasn't a murderer by nature or profession. He was a loner and a smart operator, and we all respected him. He'd simply gotten a bad break. His luck had run out.

Or had it?

Willie the Weasel had been doing a five-to-ten rap at the Big House. He was there on the night that Lennie was scheduled to die. He told me what happened with mixed expressions coming and going on his face.

"Lennie took his imprisonment hard," Willie said. "Harder than most. He'd never been in the can before, and he didn't like it. But worse than that, he knew he was going to die and it near drove him crazy. He wasn't a murderer. He hadn't meant to kill that cop. He didn't know what made him pull the trigger.

"The thing got him and got him good. He couldn't eat and he couldn't sleep. He fell away to a shadow for thinking about what was in store for him. The screws, even the warden felt sorry for the guy. But there wasn't anything they could do. There wasn't anything anyone could do except the governor, and all the appeals to him failed.

"Well, they put Lennie in a cell on death row. I guess those last few hours were pretty bad. I guess Lennie lost some of his marbles. Then came the day and the night that Lennie was scheduled for the hot seat. The time was set for ten o'clock."

Willie the Weasel stopped and smirked a little.

"Well," I said, "go on. Now don't tell me," I said sarcastically, "that Lucky Lennie's luck returned and the governor got soft hearted and changed his mind."

"Well, yes," said Willie. "And then again, no."

"Look, Willie," I said with restrained patience. "I was out of town when it happened. I just got back this morning. So quit the double talk and fill me in on the details."

Willie shrugged. "Well, Lennie's hot seat act was scheduled for Friday, November ninth, nineteen sixty-five."

"So?"

"So," said Willie, obviously annoyed at my ignorance, "that was the night of the blackout, the power failure, in eight of the eastern states, including this one."

My mouth fell open. I stared. I started to speak and couldn't. The blackout! Lennie's luck! They tied in. Could it have happened to anyone except Lucky Lennie? It was unbelievable. It wasn't real. Why, if the story of that blackout had been written into a fiction story, no editor would have dreamed of viewing it with credulity. He would have said it was ridiculous! Impossible! Such a thing had not happened anywhere in the world in the history of electricity.

"What happened?" I whispered.

Willie shrugged. "Without electricity they couldn't give Lennie the hot seat. They waited, expecting the power to come back on any minute. But it didn't. Lennie was half out of his mind after an hour or so. And in frustration, the warden called the governor."

"And the governor commuted Lennie's sentence to life imprisonment."

"That's right. He said nobody knew when the power would come back on. He said Lennie had suffered enough."

I whistled softly.

"Lucky Lennie," I breathed. "So his luck stayed with him after all."

"As I said," Willie remarked. "Yes and no. You see, Lennie couldn't stand the strain. He died of a heart seizure before the warden could tell him his sentence had been commuted."

Six and Seven

by HAL ELLSON

Somewhere in the icy water below him a man lay dead. And somewhere in the icy night around him a killer waited to finish his job—double murder!

TWO BARGE-LOADS of coffee stolen last night, two the previous week: Gone into thin air.

Sullivan, across the street from Pier Six in the shadowed doorway of a warehouse, shivered as the wind lifted off the harbor. A long, dismal night lay ahead.

A long, long night, he thought, lighting a cigarette and feeling the chill dampness of the harbor in his stiffening fingers. No, these were no common harbor pirates on a cheap grab-and-run heist. They were draining the pier and doing it at will.

Nail the gang leader and it's over. An easy thought; another thing to do. As for standing in this doorway—a waste of time, Sullivan decided.

Shivering, he stepped from the

doorway. Two blocks away he entered the Crystal Light, a dismal bar. As he stepped inside, a short man in a peajacket moved from the bar to a phone booth. Sullivan faced the barman; cold blue eyes surveyed him.

"Neal around?"

"He was in and left. What'll it be?"

"Old Grand Dad for a cold night."

The barman poured. Sullivan lifted the glass, glanced toward the phone booth. The door was open; an empty cubicle.

"Another one?" The barman tried for his attention, but Sullivan ran out the front door, turned the corner. The short man ran up ahead.

"Neal!" The cry froze him in his tracks; slowly he turned.

"What's the hurry?"

"No hurry. I was on the way home."

"So I see." Sullivan nodded toward the rear door by which Neal had sought to escape. Neal in the small empty dining area in back of the Crystal Light, seated, face blank.

"A quick phone call you made," Sullivan remarked.

"I just didn't reach my party, that's all."

"So you hiked out the back door."

"A short cut."

"Stop lying, Neal. You gave yourself away. So did that bum Johnson behind the bar. You must be giving him a lot of business."

"No more than usual."

"That's an expensive ring you're wearing."

"I won it in a crap game."

"Sure, on Pier Six. How about that? Another load of coffee was stolen last night. You heard?"

"That's not news any more."

"What is?" asked Sullivan.

"Nothing."

"You shouldn't have run out the back door. You shouldn't have worn that ring. Tell me about the coffee, Neal, or you're in trouble."

"Look, I don't know the operation, and I don't know who's running it. I'm strictly in the dark."

"Where in the dark?"

"I pick up and deliver. It's already loaded on a truck at Pier Seven. I come in the morning, dump the load at a warehouse, collect and take a walk. That's all I know about the whole operation."

"Who pays you off, Neal?"

"Biff Malone. A rat. He's holding out on me at twenty bucks a load. Now can I go?"

"No. When's the next haul coming off?"

"I never know till Malone calls. It could be tomorrow night."

"You won't be available. You'll be sick, but you'll have a friend named Mac to fill in."

"And you're Mac? Nothing doing."

Sullivan struck a match and lit

a cigarette. "I'm afraid you have no choice."

"Yeah, no choice," Neal growled and glanced toward the door.

"Go," said Sullivan and, in spite of the cold, he returned to the warehouse doorway to stare across the cobbled street at the huge silent shed of Pier Six, then set his gaze on Seven.

Between the two piers a dark narrow strip of water, through which the wind soared and over which countless sacks of coffee found their way to be trucked off leisurely to a convenient warehouse.

Footsteps sounded on the frozen walk. A tall figure stopped squarely in front of the doorway; light sprang from an electric-torch. Sullivan squinted. Patrolman Gruber on his beat, grinning, snapping off the torch. "You want to freeze to death, Sully?"

"I'm afraid I've reached that state already."

"A tough assignment." Gruber nodded toward the pier and Sullivan looked past him. Two piers and a black strip of water. Between Six and Seven lay the answer to the vanishing coffee.

"You can stand here all night with your eyes wide open and see nothing. In the morning the coffee'll be gone," said Gruber. "They're smart crooks."

"Too smart." A chill shook Sullivan. "I'm not standing here all night." He started for Pier Six.

"A waste of time," Gruber said after him. "You won't find anything."

"Don't look, don't find," Sullivan flung back. He stepped from the curb to the unforgiving granite cobbles of the gutter, with the huge pier door yawning black and hungry ahead.

"Where do you think you're going?" The slurred voice came out of the dark. The pier guard challenging, stepping forward unsteadily, bloated face and half-closed eyes reflecting the faint light of a naked bulb hanging above the yawning mouth of the pier. Sullivan flashed his badge. "Going for a look-see."

"Okay." The blowsy guardian faded back into the shadows, and Sullivan stepped under the shed, a huge tent of silence in the chill, motionless air.

Midway up the pier a small door opened onto the south-side, a black oblong sucking the wind in greedily. Bracing against the icy flow, Sullivan stepped out to the stringpiece, a dangerously narrow unlit path, and caught the wind at full force, heard the savage slapping of water around oily piles.

Then he heard a dull, timber-shaking thud and saw the ponderous phantoms riding the black swells rolling into the slip. Barges, one with windows aglow, the other blighted and dark.

The two carriers from which a fortune in coffee had vanished.

Carefully he leaped to a plunging deck, knocked on the cabin door of the barge with lighted windows. Captain Swenson, heavy-set, bull-necked, a good sixty, opened the door. "Yes?"

A thud on deck. Sullivan turned. Gruber had joined him.

"Just in case you need help," he said.

"Thanks." Sullivan turned back to Swenson and displayed his badge. The captain's face dropped; he stepped back, shaking his head slowly.

"Another one of you, and at this hour?" he said. "I told the others I don't know nothing."

"He's scared. He won't talk," Gruber put in.

"Give him a chance."

"I don't know nothing," the captain said, his voice all sincerity, but the lie there on his face.

A waste of time. Let him be. "Where's the other captain?" Sullivan asked.

"Norvo? Getting drunk, most likely. You won't find him on board. Look in the Crystal Light."

Sullivan and Gruber backed from the warmth of the cabin into the teeth of the wind, jumped to the pier and went through the door in the shed. A frigid calm, the big door up ahead. The guard there, drunk and useless. Passing him, crossing the granite cobbles to the sidewalk.

"What now?" Gruber asked.

"I'm looking up Norvo."

"He won't talk either. Go home to bed."

"After I speak with Norvo."

Gruber shrugged. "Suit yourself. Sorry I can't go along. I'm still on the beat."

"NORVO?"

The man at the bar looked up, face bloated and pale, eyes slitted. "That's me. Who are you?" Hostility in his voice, too much whiskey in his gut.

"Buy you a drink?" Sullivan said.

The slit eyes opened a mite. The last of Norvo's pay on the bar—silver, no bills. "You can buy me a drink, pal."

Behind the bar Johnson listening. Sullivan guided Norvo to a booth out of ear-shot, carried drinks to the table, bided his time, then put the question. Norvo blinked, sat like a stone, stupified. Finally a smile, secretive and amused, lit his face. "I think I know something. You come with me."

"Where?"

"Just come. Show you how is done. Another drink?"

Three more shots to ready Norvo, then, up he stood, unsteady, rocking, glassy-eyed. "We go to my boat. Show you what I mean. Smart crooks, simple trick."

Out the door they moved, the captain with the blind-staggers, hit by the cold, rubber-legged. Sullivan grasped his arm, guided him

down the dark slope of the street to the cobbled waterfront and on into Six, the pier chillier now, a tomb of silence, and Norvo looser, a rubber-man jellying into a softer medium, tongue thickening, accent heavier, talking in riddles. A threat to himself on the narrow stringpiece with the icy water waiting below.

Sullivan gritted his teeth, guided him to the black plunging shadow of the barge.

"Careful. The water's cold."

Norvo chuckled. "A winter bath would kill me. But don't worry." He brushed Sullivan's hand from his arm, jumped to the heaving deck of the barge. Sullivan followed. They entered the cabin. "Match. Light the lamp." Norvo speaking in the dark, then stumbling, falling, a heavy object crashing against the floor.

Sullivan struck a match. A table over-turned, Norvo stretched out, eyes closed. A hurricane-lamp, brass gleaming. The match to the wick. Light blooming in a yellow butterfly of flame. The match charred. Sullivan stooped to give Norvo a hand. The captain's eyes still closed, body a dead weight.

"Come on, Norvo." Like talking to a brick wall. The man out like a light. Slapping his face was futile. Drag him to his bunk, dump him on it. A great rasping snore from Norvo's mouth. Let him sleep it off.

"Did your good deed for the night?" Gruber spoke from the doorway. Sullivan turned, shook his head. "The fool passed out on me."

"Before or after he talked?"

"He didn't talk, but he was ready. Too bad he passed out."

Gruber shook his head. "You were taken, Sully. He drank your drinks, but he doesn't know anything."

"He was going to show me the trick."

"Sure, he was, but nobody talks on the waterfront. You won't get anything from him."

Shrugging, Sullivan glanced at his watch. "Late. I'll give him a try tomorrow. Let's go."

At the precinct house late in the grey cold December morning Sullivan got the news. Norvo dead. Body in the morgue. The harbor-police had pulled him from a beam below the pier. The coroner's verdict: death by drowning.

At ten-thirty, with the tide running out and complaining gulls moving inland, Sullivan lit a cigarette in Swenson's cabin. Swenson pale and uneasy, shrugging. "Norvo drank too much. What could he expect? He must have fallen overboard, hit his head and—"

"I brought him to his boat last night," Sullivan said, "and put him in his bunk."

"Maybe he got up to check his lines and fell overboard."

"Or someone pushed him."

"What for?"

"You heard nothing last night?"

"Only the wind," Swenson said, staring at the floor. "Norvo fell. Yes, he drank too much. He—"

"Was pushed. Murdered." The word exploded in the cabin and Sullivan slapped the old man, knocked him across his bunk, grabbed his throat. The rough bare-fisted workings of the law. "Maybe you pushed him, Swensen." Another stinging slap. "Do you know what you get for murder in this state? Do you—"

Swenson choking, protesting innocence, a frightened old man. "Norvo was pushed, but I didn't do it."

"Who did?"

Silence. Fear welling up like poison in Swenson's eyes, his lips pressed tight, then, finally and inevitably, the lie: "I don't know. It was too dark to see. I hear big argument, shouts, a splash."

A DIRTY GREY harbor, dirty cold sky with a promise of snow. Only the wind, Sullivan thought, leaving the pier. Back to the precinct-house. No calls. Nothing. Coffee and a cigarette. More coffee, cigarettes, then the phone. Neal calling. "They're hitting the pier tonight, Sullivan."

"Fine. You going to play sick?"

"I have no choice, but if anything goes wrong—"

"Don't worry about me. You heard about Norvo?"

"Who's he?"

"Captain of one of the barges that's been losing coffee. I saw him last night. Drunk. This morning the harbor police pulled him out of the slip. He's supposed to have fallen in."

During the night the thieves struck, the coffee from the barges made fast to Pier Six delivered to Seven, loaded on two large trucks and ready to go. A very neat operation.

At eight, longshoremen entered the pier. Noise, activity, the normal routines.

At eight-thirty the first load of coffee moved out of Seven, headed for its destination. Malone turned to Sullivan, cold-blue eyes probing a moment. "All right. Take it away, Mac."

The truck rumbling over planks, then into the grey tide of morning, headed north. A brief trip, ten blocks to a grimy warehouse, sooted black, a windowless fortress.

The first truck inside, unloading. Malone already there, cigar in his teeth, watching Sullivan bringing in the second haul. Pasty-faced, curiously relaxed, as if all this were routine, with nothing to be feared. Sullivan braked the truck, climbed from the cab, approached him.

"Okay, Mac." Malone handed him a crisp twenty-dollar bill and looked him square in the eye. "Easy money, huh?"

Sullivan nodded toward the truck. "You can afford it with that load. Ride it right off the pier. A

neat trick. I hope you're getting a good price?"

"Fair. But what makes you ask?"

"I know a party who might take it off your hands—at a better than fair price."

Malone pulled the cigar from his mouth, looked at it, then at Sullivan. "I'll think it over."

"What's to think over? Say the word and—"

"I'll let you know." Malone put the cigar back in his mouth and measured Sullivan. "Want to drive when we make the next haul?"

"What about Neal?"

"He's finished. I can't depend on him."

"He might think I'm pushing him out of the picture."

"Don't worry about that stew-bum. Be at the pier Saturday morning and, if your friend's interested, maybe he can bid on the haul. I'll see you, Mac." Malone turned away.

Outside the warehouse, everything grey, cold, grim, but a small fire burning inside Sullivan. Things looking up. The coffee from Six moving out of Seven, as Neal had said, the warehouse to hold it, and Malone. Some of the parts, but not enough. Somebody behind Malone. Nail him down. But how does the coffee move from Six to Seven?

Hot coffee in a diner, then on to Neal's place with the bad news, the one off-note of the morning.

Neal still asleep, gimlet-eyed when he finally opened the door.

"Now what?" he growled at Sullivan, opening the door wider, allowing him in and turning to the stove, flame bursting under a stained coffee pot. Turning, yawning, rubbing his face, Neal said, "How did it go?"

"With some reservations, great." Sullivan sat, dropped his cigarette in an empty beer-can and swept aside the stale debris of a midnight snack.

"Great?" said Neal from across the table, shaking his head, blue eyes widening and coming awake. "Don't be too cocky. Malone's no fool."

"I know, but like you said, he's only a front. Somebody bigger is in the background. That's the boy I want."

"You expect to nail him?"

"Maybe."

"Don't and you're dead."

"I know. Now for the bad news." Sullivan placed the crisp twenty-dollar bill on the table. Malone's blood money. Neal eyed it dubiously. "What's the matter? It's contaminated?"

"Malone fired you."

"You copped my job?" Neal smiled wryly. "Now that's something. I co-operate and lose my meal ticket."

"The twenty's yours. Every time I drive you collect."

Neal shrugged and picked up the bill. "For a flatfoot you're okay."

Sullivan smiled, stood up and went to the door. "Thanks and take it easy." On that note he left.

Go back to the precinct house? The simplest thing, but he didn't go. The movement of the coffee from Six to Seven. How was it done? Back on the waterfront, he stood on the bulkhead between the two piers and studied them, noted the way the barges lay.

He was about to leave when a tug entered the slip, a barge in tow. It dropped it at Seven, picked up another and delivered it to Six, then steamed off. Still no answer, but—

Excited, he hurried to the nearest phone and called the company whose barges were being rifled, certain he'd solved the riddle of the stolen coffee. "Suppose one of your barges, due on Six, is towed to Seven instead, with its cargo aboard?" he asked.

"That happens," the answer came. "If Six is crowded, Seven will do for a lay-up till Six is cleared."

Sullivan groaned and hung up, the riddle unsolved. Back to Neal's place. Neal gone. Down the stairs to the nearest bar. Not there, either, nor the next place. Let the question wait.

In the evening, back to Neal's. Still out. A round of the bars and no sign of him. Strange. A stop at Neal's girl-friend's. Mary Ellis, small, blonde, evil-tempered. "If I knew where Neal was, you'd be the last person on earth I'd tell," she snarled and slammed the door in Sullivan's face.

Next he looked up Malone, found him in a bar and came quickly to the point. "My man's interested in the coffee you're bagging tomorrow."

"Forget it," said Malone.

"What's the matter? You don't like money?"

"We're sticking with the original customer, that's all."

"Who's the we? I thought you were bossing the operation."

"I am," Malone said flushing.

No point in pressing. Someone behind Malone. Mr. Anonymous who wouldn't deal for more money. Something wrong there. "Okay, Malone. See you tomorrow at the pier." Sullivan started for the door.

Another cold night. He headed home, got into bed. At midnight the phone ringing. The sergeant at the precinct house calling. Johnny Neal found in an alley, shot dead. Sullivan hung up, perplexed. Why would anyone want to kill the little fellow? Why?

IN THE MORNING, at Pier Seven, two trucks were loaded. A signal and Sullivan drove off to the warehouse. Malone already there, with two crisp tens. Sullivan took them. "My friend's still interested in buying."

"No dice, Mac."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Malone turned,

started to walk away. "When's the next job?" Sullivan asked.

"Call me in a day or so," Malone said.

"Right."

Outside the warehouse, Sullivan paused. Malone hadn't mentioned Neal. Ignorant of the murder, or playing cute? Cute.

Fifteen minutes later Sullivan walked into Gruber finishing his patrol. "What's up, Sully?"

"A few questions for Mary Ellis."

"Need a hand?"

A shrug from Sullivan. Both of them at Mary Ellis' door, one behind the other, and she snarling, "What the hell do you want? Get out of my sight."

"One minute." Sullivan pushed against the door, made his way into the foyer. Mary sobbing, "Oh, he's dead. Neal's dead. Why don't you go away?"

"I'm sorry—"

"Sorry? Why should you be sorry?"

"I liked him, Mary."

"You used him."

"It worked both ways."

"You used him and got him killed, you rotten flatfoot. Now you come here and say you're sorry."

"I am, but that's not why I came."

Open-mouthed, staring up at him. "Then why did you come?"

"I need information. Maybe you can help. You knew what Neal was doing."

"What do you mean?"

"He had a deal going, driving a truck with stolen goods."

"So?"

"That's my assignment. I have some of the facts; some I haven't. Like the big guy behind the scenes who gives the orders."

"You expect me to tell you?"

"Neal's dead. Someone killed him. That person is the boss of the

operation, or he gave the order. Either way—"

"You're the murderer!" Mary screamed. Then, scratching and kicking, she came at him and Gruber took over, seized, shook her up, slapped her viciously and twisted her arm.

"All right, spitfire, the name. The name or I'll bust your arm in little pieces."

Vicious. Too much for Sullivan. He began to protest, and Gruber turned on him. "Hell, I thought you wanted information. Let me be and I'll make her talk."

"Forget it. Let's get out of here."

Gruber shrugged and released Mary. Out they went, down the stairs and into the street. Gruber shook his head.

"You should see your face," he said, "and you let that dame get away with it."

Sullivan touched his face and looked at his hand. Blood.

Upstairs in the precinct house, Detective Kelly said, "What lovely scars they'll make. You should wear a mask, Sully."

"Okay, I'll order one."

"You really got those scratches in the line of duty?"

Sullivan gazed at the ceiling. The phone rang, Kelly answered it. "For you. Another feline, loverboy. This one's purring."

Sullivan snatched the phone, listened, nodded, finally hung up, a frown on his face.

"You look unhappy," Kelly needled. "Did she turn you down?"

"That was Neal's girl friend calling from the funeral parlor. She wants me to pick her up there. She's ready to talk."

"I detect a note of doubt in your voice," said Kelly.

"She changed her mind too fast."

"Scratches in the morning, kisses in the evening," Kelly grinned. "A woman's right to change her mind. You're not seeing her?"

Sullivan stood up and nodded, the same doubtful look still on his face.

McCray's funeral parlor, four blocks from the waterfront on a street of decaying brownstones. An awning stretching to the curb from the basement entrance, a brownstone converted to a house for the dead. The street empty, paper debris in the gutter riding the wind. Eleven o'clock. The churchbell on the next street tolling the hour. Sullivan striding toward McCray's, pausing beneath the awning. Go in, or wait out here? Too cold to stay outside.

He moved toward the door half-below street level, the glass giving off a faintly pinkish light, lettering in gold: MCCRAY FUNERAL HOME. No sound but the aching wind. Shadowy steps. Preoccupied, Sullivan stumbled and plunged downward awkwardly; simultaneously the silence cracked open. A gun shot, glass shattering, a car roaring off.

At the bottom of the steps, unscathed amidst fragments of glass, Sullivan picked himself up. The assassin's car screeching around the corner and Mary Ellis, glassy-eyed and drunk, stepping from the funeral parlour, crying "Oh,—God! What happened?" McCray holding her arm and staring dumfounded at the glass fragments bearing the shattered gold letters of his name and profession.

Black coffee for Mary Ellis. Then questions, but no answers—at least not the right ones. She was sick, scared. More black coffee. No good. Her head on the table. Sullivan lifted it.

"I want the name," he said. "I haven't got all night."

"Good night." Mary's head started to fall. A stinging slap straightened her up.

"The name, Mary."

"I don't know his name."

"Don't give me that. You set me up. You knew the guy with the gun was waiting for me."

"How would I know that?"

"Because you arranged it."

"He must have followed you."

"No, the car was at the curb, so he had to know I was coming. If I hadn't stumbled—"

"Let me alone."

"The name, Mary."

"Don't know. Don't know," she moaned, tears rolling down her cheeks, head toppling again. Another slap to straighten her up.

"I haven't even started on you," Sullivan warned. "Don't talk and by morning you won't have a head."

White-faced, eyes glassy, Mary stared at him, shook her head.

"He made me do it," she sobbed. "He said he'd kill me if I didn't."

"The name?"

Mary shaking her head, eyes widening with terror. "No, he killed Neal, he wanted to kill you, he'll kill me. I don't know who he is."

Sullivan lifted her head again, released it and lit a cigarette. Mary still staring at him. "I'm not going to tell. Not going . . . Not . . ." Her head dropping. As her face touched the table, Sullivan got up. On the way out he slammed the door.

Two days elapsed with no new developments. Late morning of the third day, snow, a few thin flakes fluttered out of the sky, vanished, then the storm struck and enveloped the waterfront. By five, white drifts lay piled against the piers and white ghosts swirled in the windy streets facing the harbor.

At five-thirty the call came through to Sullivan. Two barges loaded with coffee headed for Pier Six, due to tie up in approximately an hour. Sullivan dropped the phone and looked at Kelly. "Well, it's all set."

"You're really going through with it?"

"It's the only way. I'll be there when those barges arrive and I'm

staying with them till hell freezes over."

"You won't last. Not on a night like this."

"It has to be tonight."

"What's the rush? You can't wait?"

"For the good of my health, I can't. That bullet had my name on it the other night."

"Then get off the case before you're carried off."

Sullivan grinned. "No, I think tonight will tell." He stood up and went to the door. "I have a cockeyed theory about that coffee."

"Like what?"

"That it never reaches Pier Six."

"I don't follow. You'll have to explain."

"I can't. I've got to prove the theory. See you later, Kelly."

Dead streets, snow covering the grime and dirt of the waterfront.

Six-fifteen by the clock in the empty diner when Patrolman Gruber stepped in. Sullivan looked up from his second cup of coffee. Gruber shaking off a white mantle of snow and lighting up.

"God, what a night. Coffee, Swede." He turned from the counterman, took a stool. "What are you doing down here, Sully?"

"What do you think?" Sullivan glanced at his watch. "In thirteen minutes two barges will tie up at Six. I'm staying with them. Some time between now and morning I'll know how that coffee is vanishing."

"As simple as that?"

"As simple as that."

Gruber smiled and shook his head. "Nothing's that simple. You'll be lucky if you don't freeze to death."

"That may happen, but I doubt it. In fact, I believe I'll have the answer in a very short while."

"What makes you so confident?" Gruber asked.

"An idea. You see, I don't believe the coffee was stolen from Six—"

"Oh, come off it," Gruber laughed.

"I'm serious. The thieves have been pulling a switch, looting those barges—"

Gruber laughed again. "What were you drinking, Sully? Do you feel all right?"

"Perfect."

"But the coffee is stolen before it arrives at Six?"

"Exactly."

Gruber shook his head. "You're way off. Better work on something else."

"Not tonight." Sullivan stood up and drew on his gloves. "Time to go."

"Here's luck," Gruber saluted with his steaming cup of coffee.

Drunk again and nodding, the guard in an office at the head of the pier. Sullivan shook his head, the icy chill of the giant shed seized him, its heavy silence a ghostly embrace. A small door midway up the pier, with snow

piling in from the night and the wind's demented soughing.

Six-thirty and no sign of the barges; nothing out there in the dark. A delay because of the storm? Sullivan began to wait, and the torture began.

At seven-thirty, nothing. Eight o'clock—nothing but the icy claws of the night in his flesh, in the very marrow of his bones. Back through the pier he strode, out into the snow.

Lights were glimmering in the diner, the one sign of life. Warmth as the door opened, a welcome caress. The Swedish counterman looking up, as if seeing a ghost. Gruber gone.

"Coffee," Sullivan said, his teeth chattering. He went to the phone booth for information on the missing barges, came out, bolted the steaming-hot coffee the Swede had set on the counter and asked for more, thinking of the harsh voice on the phone: "Storm or no storm, we deliver. The barges were put on Six as scheduled. You must be blind." The phone banging down.

Sullivan lifted the second cup of coffee, the Swede watching him, pallid and cold-eyed, finally saying, "A bad night out. Why don't you stay here?"

The grubby diner suddenly like a sanctuary, cozy and warm, holding back the storm. Stay and be warm. Stay and be safe. You won't get a dollar more for risking your neck. Sullivan shook his head.

"I've got a job to do," he said to the Swede. "Can you fill this cup again?"

"Sure." The Swede filled it and turned the radio on softly. "You're not like Gruber."

"What does that mean?"

"Do you think he's on the beat? Not that fellow. He's holed up in a nice warm spot, but tonight I don't blame him."

"Only mad dogs and mad detectives go out in the midnight snow." Sullivan stood up, downed the scalding coffee and headed for the door.

Mantled with white, the two scows moved uneasily against the bulkhead. Standing on the narrow stringpiece, Sullivan stared at them. Snow swirled around him, the wind cut his face. The storm was getting worse, the temperature still falling. A long night ahead, or a brief one?

He moved inside the pier to escape the wind, but there was no escape from the cold. He groaned, waited, stepped out on the stringpiece again, that narrow strip, icy-coated and doubly dangerous now.

The barge before him plunging wildly, deck slippery. Sickened, he watched it rising and falling. A misstep and catastrophe meant death in the frigid water. The deck rose up and he jumped, landed safely. Now a new peril confronted him. He braced himself, took hold of the steel cable, inched along that infinitely narrow strip skirting

the superstructure of the plunging barge and finally reached the cargo-door. A lock holding it. With numbed fingers he fitted a key into it, pushed open the door and stepped inside. Sheer empty blackness.

He felt that instantly and drew his flashlight. No cargo. Nothing. Not a single sack of coffee. As expected. Proof of how the thieves had worked. A trick so neat and simple that he almost laughed, when someone called his name.

"Sullivan!"

He turned, thrusting his head out of the hold, and there on the stringpiece stood Gruber. "Looking for me?"

Startled, Gruber turned, saw him. "Ah, there you are. I thought you might be in trouble."

"I'm okay, but thanks for coming."

"Find anything?"

"Enough to hang somebody."

"Or yourself!" Gruber's angry shout sounded above the wind, hand moved for his gun. A wild shot, followed by another at blackness, at nothing, the target gone. Sullivan, bracing in the protective dark of the hold, fired. Hit, Gruber reeled back; slowly he crumpled to the stringpiece.

Moments later Sullivan stood above him, the flashlight's beam finding the face of a corpse, cold white flakes of snow settling on it.

Sullivan shook his head. This was how it had to end, no other way, for the sowers of violence reaped violence.

A half hour later in the precinct-house Sullivan put down his coffee and chafed his hands.

"Still cold?" said Kelly.

"It's in my bones. A bad night."

"And a good job done." Kelly shook his head.

"Gruber," he said with distaste. "When did you suspect him?"

"The night Captain Norvo was drowned. Gruber knew he was ready to talk and finished him off."

"But—?"

"How did I figure it out? I questioned the pier guard. He's a bottle baby, sleeps most of the time, but he had his eyes open when Gruber slipped into the pier. It was just before dawn. That gave me the lead. A cold-blooded character. He gunned down Johnny Neal, then tried for me with the help of Neal's girl-friend. Tonight was the showdown. I told him I was onto the heisting and was staying with the barges. He came after me to stop me. You know the rest."

"Except for the coffee. How did it leave the pier?"

"Leave? It was stolen before it got there. The barges were taken to Seven and unloaded, then towed to Six with nothing in them."

Kelly nodded. "Simple and neat. How'd you get on to it?"

"By watching a tugboat shifting barges in a slip. It came to a bit of slight of hand on water." Sullivan grinned. "Ah, this coffee is good!"

Every girl has her price, he knew.
But—how much would Carol's be?

The Sister Act

by TONY NOICE

THE MCGILL BUILDING on Broadway is a relic of sorts. In the heyday of vaudville, hundreds of well-known comedians and singers, jugglers and acrobats would stream in and out of its booking offices. Today the building's glamour has all but disappeared, like the paint on its peeling walls.

The current tenants, while still theatrical agents, book mainly banquets and stag-shows, jobs which go either to newcomers, desperate for any kind of experience, or old pros who never saved enough to retire gracefully. The budgets of these "one nighters" are so small that on the legitimate ten per cent commission, the agents would starve. They solve this problem by charging from fifty per cent to seventy-five per cent.

The increased percentage is le-

galized by a change of title; the agents now call themselves "Floor Show Producers". This enables them to collect three hundred dollars for a performance, pay the actors one hundred dollars, and pocket the rest. In most cases, "producing" the show consists of no more than supplying the entertainers with the address of the banquet hall.

Buddy Carlin was a prime example of this new style impresario. A balding, beady-eyed misanthrope in his early fifties, Carlin sat at his desk every day waiting for his fringe benefits. One of those benefits had just opened the door, poked her head in timidly and said, "Mr. Carlin? I'm Carol Lang."

She was young, probably still in her teens. She wore a neat brown suit an inch or so longer than was fashionable. Her right hand clutched a large black photo album. The anxious-to-please expression in her eyes heightened the over-all effect of extreme fragility. Just the type of girl Carlin loved to educate.

"Come right in and shut the door, miss," he said. "What can I do for you?"

Carol walked quickly to the agent's desk, sat down on the hardwood chair facing him and went into her well-rehearsed sales talk. "I'm a dancer, Mr. Carlin. Actually half of a sister act, Barbara and Carol Lang. We do tap, modern and ballet. I have some pictures here if you'd care to see them."

Carlin liked looking at dancer's pictures—they always showed legs. He said, "Sure, Honey. Let's see."

The album contained dozens of amateurish photographs, strictly dancing school stuff. The costumes were all practice leotards disguised with sequins and fringe. Carlin said, "Very nice, very nice. Have you worked anywhere in this area?"

"No, we just came in from upstate, the Sandhurst Club in Albany."

She was even a lousy liar; the Sandhurst Club hadn't used shows in months. Perfect, he thought, a pushover. She'll do anything to get a start.

"Well, Honey, I'll tell you what. I'll make some calls this afternoon and try to line something up. Come back later tonight. Say around eight. Okay?"

He reached over and squeezed her arm, hard enough to let her know he was interested, not hard enough to frighten her. She stiffened a second, then relaxed.

"Oh, thank you Mr. Carlin," she said. "I'll be here. You can count on it."

After she left, he stared at the door for five minutes. Yes, it was going to be a wonderful evening.

At seven forty-five, Carlin leaned back on his cushioned swivel-chair and surveyed his office. The stage was set. The chair

Carol Lang had used earlier was piled high with old photos and brochures. Only the long couch against the wall was available. Carlin smiled and wiped the film of anticipatory sweat from his forehead. He should really charge these kids for teaching them what a rough business this is.

In a few minutes, he heard the sound of high heels in the corridor, then a knock on the door.

"Come right in."

His face fell when he saw it was a stranger. At any other time he'd have welcomed her—a tall, shapely brunette with heavily made-up eyes. She said, "I'm Barbara Lang, Mr. Carlin. My sister, Carol, was in earlier; she told me you might have some work for us."

Carlin looked her up and down, not as deliciously inexperienced as the younger sister, but well worth a try. Besides, he had already told his wife he was working late and invested in a pint of cheap whiskey.

"Sure, I remember," he said. "Come on in."

Barbara walked to the center of the room. Carlin, without getting up, pointed to the couch and said, "Take a seat. I'll be with you in a minute." He pretended to study a contract on his desk; always good to let them think you're busy. Finally, he put the document away, went over to the door and flipped the bolt shut.

"Those cleaning women are a pain," he said, "they barge right in during an interview." He came back to his desk, sat on the edge and gazed at the girl approvingly. "You're a good looking woman, Barbara."

"Thank you. My sister said you might have some work for us."

Carlin laughed. "All business, huh? Well, that's good. Of course, there are different ways of doing business. Me, I prefer the friendly way." He reached into the bottom drawer and removed the bottle and a couple of reasonably clean glasses. He poured two large shots and said, "You know, it's almost impossible to break through in this town unless you have someone like me plugging for you.

"I was on the phone this afternoon talking to a client, a guy who books a lot of conventions at pretty fair money. I told him about your act. At first he didn't want to try any newcomers but then he said if I'd vouch for you he might take a chance. Naturally if I go out of my way to help you, I'll expect you to show a little appreciation." He handed her a glass. "What say we drink to it?"

She said, "I'm sorry, I don't drink."

"You don't huh? Well, I'm not going to tell you how to run your life, Barbara, but if you're not friendly with the right people in this business, you're headed for an awful flop."

Carlin finished his drink quickly. He never believed in wasting

time in these situations. If this one didn't want to come across, there'd always be another green kid tomorrow. He sat beside her, immediately pulled her to him and kissed her crudely on the mouth.

What happened next was the surprise of Carlin's life. His arm was twisted so violently it almost broke. He felt himself being hurled against the desk. Its sharp corner dug into his solar-plexus, forcing the breath out of him. He sank to the floor. He lay there a minute, feeling sick; then got up on his hands and knees. When his eyes focused he saw the girl standing over him. Her left hand contained a policewoman's badge.

"Okay, Mr. Carlin," she said contemptuously. "You've pulled this stunt once too often; we're going downtown."

Shortly after eleven, Barbara Lang entered a small coffee shop and slid into a booth opposite her sister.

"Hi, Honey."

Carol looked up, still the helpless little girl. "How did it go?"

"Just great," Barbara said. "You sure can line them up. Four out of six of those bums were happy to 'bribe' me—almost five hundred dollars worth." She smiled at her kid sister. "You know, I bet we're the highest paid unknown act in showbusiness."

In the Next Issue—Complete and Exclusively Yours—

A REASON TO DIE

A Thrilling New Mike Shayne Short Novel

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Next month's feature novel headlines Mike Shayne in one of his greatest cases, a danger-packed chase which spans the life—and violent death—of a man who didn't have an enemy in the world, yet was marked for certain execution! You will hail this complete feature short novel as one of Brett Halliday's most dynamic in a long line of crime action triumphs by fiction's most time-tested ace of all. Reserve your copy now!

A FACE FAR BELOW

by THOMAS MILLSTEAD

Somewhere down there death was waiting. Death—and the face of a cruel, nameless killer . . .

●

AT NOON he heard the corridor fill with the scurry of feet headed for the elevators and, ultimately, the lunch counters on the street level six floors below.

George Osborne sat absolutely motionless in his tiny office, waiting for the rush to subside, studying the face in the framed photograph in the center of his stained, chipped desk.

It was the face of a girl, a fragile-boned face held solemnly still for portrait purposes but with laughter about to leap through the wide, clear eyes and the full, slightly parted lips. Golden hair, a few unruly wisps trickling down over the high forehead, tumbled back almost to the shoulders.

Osborne snapped his head away and got clumsily to his feet. Suddenly the pain was scalding again.

Sue. His daughter. So young. So very young. A student nurse at eighteen. A bride at nineteen.

Dead at twenty.

He walked to the window. He fumbled a moment with the latch. It would not swing around until he applied the pressure of both hands.

Dead at twenty.

The window opened with a clatter. He stepped out at once onto the ledge.

The wind, stronger than he had imaged, tugged at him, whining in a high treble. He pulled back, hands clawing at the abrasive cement blocks of the building's exterior. He gasped involuntarily, and the breath was torn from him and blown away. He closed his eyes.

Something flapped against his face. It puzzled him and then he knew. His necktie. The silk, rainbow hued tie Sue had given him two months before, on his birthday.

"You've got to wear it, daddy," she had laughed. "I'm so tired of those gloomy old brown and black monstrosities of yours."

How she had delighted in color and movement and the shiny things of the world, this girl who had brought him the only brightness he would ever know.

He opened his eyes. They were a steely gray, grown black-ringed and pouchy only lately. He was a stern looking man, almost handsome, with close-cropped gray hair and a square face unlined except for the downward sag of the jowls around his tightly pursed mouth.

He edged to the right, further from the security of the window.

A slim secretary, hurrying to get in some shopping during her lunch break, saw him. She had been jostled, dropped a package and stooped to recover it. As she rose, she looked up, high up. She tried to speak, but her throat muscles seemed paralyzed. The crowd streamed past her, not noticing.

The pigeon-splattered ledge was perhaps nine inches wide, so that his toes poked out into nothingness. He stopped midway between his window and that of the insurance office next to his. No one

would be at that window now. They all left for lunch at the same time. He knew their habits. After twenty-three years in this building he knew its many routines well.

Twenty-three years. A long time to spend in one cramped office. But he had never minded. He had made a good and respectable living as a certified public accountant. He had had his job and his family. He had needed nothing more.

And now . . .

Now, nothing was what he had. Nothing! Nothing!

The shrieking wind plucked franctically at his clothing. He had forgotten how cold a day it was. He kept his eyes straight ahead, gazing over the roof of the department store across the street, fastening on the high buildings beyond.

An elderly man followed the line of the secretary's pointing finger. He pushed his glasses further up the bridge of his nose and stared. "Look," he cried, but his voice chocked. "Look," he cried again, louder.

His hands, held stiffly at his sides, palms turned against the wall, felt frozen. There was no sensation in his fingertips as they probed, unconsciously, for a firmer grip along the narrow crevices between the blocks.

So young, he thought again. But yet such depths of wisdom and strength. When Nancy died, two years before, the blow had been crushing. Only Sue, as grief-stricken as he was himself, had been able to lead him through the shambles of that period. There had been no question of his ever marrying again.

He was a man whose love was committed to only a few, but to those few forever. And so they had drawn even closer, his daughter and himself.

Perhaps it had appeared to some a possessive love. He didn't believe it had been. Naturally he had been harsh with the flippant young men who had come to take her out.

He knew this made him seem like some jealous rival. Sue herself would rumple his hair and scold him in that bantering tone which he felt compelled to scowl at but which secretly so entranced him.

But he knew he had not been unfair. He only wanted her worth to be appreciated, fully appreciated. And when Martin Talton had shown up, and it was clearly evident that he was the one, Osborne had known neither hurt nor loss—only a content that he would share Sue now with someone who understood and who cared.

"There! There!" the woman shrilled to her son of five. "See the man up there!"

"We got us a jumper," said the

cab driver in front of the department store as a fare climbed in.

"Oh! Oh!" cried a fat woman, her hands flying up to cover her eyes.

That it had been Martin Talton was, somewhat of a surprise. He was older than the others, grave in manner, not gifted with small talk. He was a tall, heavy-shouldered man, a draftsman. He had deep-set eyes that often seemed to squint—which Sue diagnosed at once as too many hours of peering over blueprints and not enough of contemplating moonlit skies. But the squint left and the eyes sparkled when Sue entered a room or spoke to him. Martin was steady and he had a way with tools and machinery and Osborne approved of him.

"That's because he's so like you, daddy." Her smile had been luminous. "Oh, so deadly serious! Maybe that's the reason why I like him too."

Osborne had not wanted to intrude on the newly married couple, yet he was immensely pleased at how frequently he was invited to their apartment. And when he learned that his first grandchild would be arriving soon after the turn of the year he had felt a spurt of joy so alien that it bewildered him . . .

His foot skittered off the ledge, threshed about in space a moment, then scrabbled back. Both legs were trembling now. Spasmodically, out of control.

"Say! It looked like—"

"Sometimes they wait for hours. You never know when they're ready."

The crowd grew thicker, massing in front of the store across the street. No one walked on the pavement beneath him.

"Oh, God," breathed a young girl to her friend, "I never saw nobody die before."

Their voices were a fluctuating murmur to him. Excited, soft, frightened, loud. For the first time, he looked down.

Hundreds of faces, mere dots at this distance. Without features, without identity. What were their thoughts now? What feelings stirred deep inside them?

"People today," he remembered saying to his son-in-law one evening over a can of beer. "I don't understand them. These things you read in the papers. The brutality. The callousness. The disregard for any values."

"Things come too easily for most of them these days," Talton had said.

"Yes. I had to work, Martin, and work hard for whatever I've gotten. Nothing was ever just handed to me. I never expected anything to be just handed to me. But now . . ."

Martin's forehead had fur-

rowed, one big hand kneading the knuckles of the other. "Now it's 'What's in it for me'—and to hell with everything else. You wonder where it will end."

For Martin Talton and George Osborne it had ended on an empty street that night in late October.

That night!

Osborne swung out his arms and smashed his clenched fists fiercely against the building in a burst of fresh agony.

"Quit shovin', quit shovin'! You ain't missed anything yet."

"They called the cops, didn't they?"

"Ach! The poor man! So alone up there."

"Jeez, I seen one hit from twenty stories once. There wasn't enough left to—"

That night in October.

His face hard, empty, pitiless, Osborne peered down at the cluster of swarming bodies below.

Yes, that night.

Martin had told Sue that whenever she left the hospital after working late she was to take a cab. The subway station was only four blocks from their home, but he did not want her walking from it at night. They lived on a pleasant block of new apartment buildings, but some of the adjacent streets were shabbier, darker, of doubtful repute.

Sue took a cab, usually, but

Martin's lectures on the need for caution had never really penetrated. This city of hers, of the job she loved, of the husband she loved, of the father she loved—it could not really be the jungle they called it. And so she had taken the subway that night.

A block from the station, three blocks from home, she was hit by a car as she stepped from the sidewalk.

The details were no mystery. It had all been witnessed by an elderly invalid looking out of her nearby tenement. The woman was convulsed with shock and had no phone and spoke English poorly. Only later, when the police came routinely to her door, did she tell what she knew.

The car, of course, continued on without stopping. Its driver had been speeding and weaving about, apparently drunk. Sue was not killed outright. She might, with immediate attention, have lived. For a brief while she was able, on

her elbows, to crawl and, feebly, to call out.

The street was quite deserted. The only passerby was a man who stopped to pick up Sue's purse and then run.

Three cars passed during the period when she was still conscious. She raised a groping hand and cried "Help." Each carefully drove around her and kept going.

Approaching sirens wailed. The crowd had spilled into the street in a huge semi-circle, blocking traffic. Motorists craned heads out of windows.

"They oughta have the nets up."

"How long's he been there?"

"No, mister. No, no, no . . ."

The far off faces seethed and bubbled, framed between his outspread feet. His wind-whipped coat felt like it was in tatters. There was a trickling on his hands which must be blood, but all sensation was numbed. is mouth was set in a tight line. The breath rasped loudly through his nose.

At no time had they so much as wept, he or Martin Talton. They were not the sort. After the funeral they had gone their stunned, silent ways.

Then Osborne appeared one day at Sue's and Martin's apartment. The things that had been hers were everywhere around them.

Talton had been sleeping on the davenport because the scent of her perfume was still faintly tangible in the bedroom. The two men sat, mute, unmoving, for many minutes.

"It's not so much the first driver, even," George Osborne said at last, his voice thick. "He was drunk. He panicked. But—the others!"

Talton nodded, his hands stiffly gripping his knees.

"The others!" Osborne repeated. He leaned forward suddenly, staring intently at Talton. "One of them! If I just had one of them! If I could just kill one of them!"

"Sure wish I had the camera."

"Go get the sandwiches. We'll eat 'em out here."

Now the faces beneath him swirled around and around, picking up momentum, like a giant pinwheel. And then it was as though he were no longer above them, but at the bottom of a pit and they were looking down, those many faces, those faceless faces.

"Jump! Jump!

Osborne shook his head, clearing it. He slid his back down a bit and tipped his head forward.

"Jump! Come on, jump!"

The voice was quite distinct. But it could have come from anywhere. Osborne's eyes narrowed

and tried to isolate faces in that vast mass.

"What you waiting for? Jump!"

It was a booming voice, a goading voice, a voice saturated with derision and hatred.

Osborne pulled away from the wall. Sweat coursed down his spine. He bent in a crouch, tensing, poised.

Instantly the crowd's great insect-like throbbing hushed.

Except for that voice.

"Come on! Jump!"

And then Osborne saw its source. It had to be the one. Other faces were blurred, indistinguishable. But this one was sharply etched. Even from six floors up. The leer of the mouth, the arrogant thrust of the head . . .

Osborne remembered how, that night in the apartment, Martin Talton's huge hands had gone white as he pressed his knees more tightly, how his eyes were all but hidden by his squint.

"Kill one of them?" Talton had said. "But we'll never know who they were."

"Then one like them!" Osborne had barked.

"One like them?"

"One of the kind who let Sue die. One of the kind you read about every day. One of the new kind. The brutal, the sneering, the callous. To rid the world of one of them!"

Talton had been quiet a long time. His hooded gaze had traveled slowly about the still room, the room that had been Sue's, over every object in it.

"One of the kind who let Sue die," he said in a whisper.

He nodded. "How would we find one? How . . . ?"

"I'll tell you how," said Osborne.

As he stared, the street below and the welter of bodies melted into a gray blur. All but the face flickering at the center of his wind-smudged field of vision. That face of casual malice.

That face that opened its mouth to shout.

"Are you going to jump? Come on! Come on!"

Another figure pushed through the haze, into Osborne's awareness. A man, a tall man in a black overcoat who moved quickly through the crowd. Now the two stood side by side, the tall man and the man who had shouted. The tall man produced a red scarf which he looped about his neck.

Instantly, George Osborne straightened. He lifted his smarting eyes from the street. He sucked a deep breath into his lungs and took a long look at the gray city towers rising about him and at the metallic, overcast sky above.

"To rid the world of one of them," he said in an even, conversational tone.

He crept carefully back along

the ledge to the window of his office and climbed inside.

"No guts. I knew it."

The man who had shouted "Jump" threw a cigarette onto the pavement and ground his foot on it, angrily. Then he snorted loudly. It was a laugh, a jeer, a summing up. He strode off.

Martin Talton, his squinting eyes mere slits, tucked the hanging ends of his red scarf into his black overcoat and followed, close behind.

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INSIDE THE HIDDEN MAN

To some he was a hero, to most a mystery—to a few a devil beyond compare! Solve, if you can, the grim riddle of Keith Craig—and how he lived and died!

by JAMES McKIMMEY

KEITH CRAIG sat upon a metal table, wide, muscled shoulders flexing as he taped his left leg. His dark hair was already damp with perspiration.

The locker room was silent except for the sound of movements of the other players putting on their gear. John Appleby, a slim dark-suited man in his early thirties, walked nervously between the players and stopped beside the table. He examined the youth.

"How's it feel, Keith?"

"Okay," Keith grunted.

A freshman with touseled blond hair said excitedly, "A scout from the University and Senator Owen both, huh?"

"Knock it off," the coach said.

The boy moved away, flushing. Keith stared after him with hard eyes, then resumed the taping. For four years he'd sat in this room before every football game and smelled the odor of sweat created by tension, the odors of alcohol and disinfectants and medicines for

the potential wounds. He'd grown to hate the smells as much as he'd grown to hate the game.

John Appleby put his hand gently on Keith's heavy shoulder. "Figure it any team, not Helsey. Just any team."

"Sure," Keith said.

They did not notice the faint sound of the helicopter moving toward town from the north.

* * *

United States Senator Philip Owen sat beside the pilot as the helicopter swung toward Willow Creek. He had flown from Washington to Omaha, used a smaller plane to Helsey, then rented the chopper.

He was a tall man with white hair, forty-two the month before. He wore a tailored topcoat, pigskin gloves and a formal hat. His face was lean, smooth and pale, appearing youthful against his white hair.

They called him Sleek Young Bull in Washington, because he was young, because he charged into conflict, because he'd run strongly enough to become the first Democrat elected to the Senate from this state in thirty-five years.

He was still faintly surprised that he was a member of that select club. As a boy he'd never really thought much about becoming ambitious. Things had simply happened. He'd lived with Aunt Marie in Willow Creek after his parents had died. He'd gotten high grades with ease. A scholarship had been given to him at the University. Then he'd been granted a Rhodes Scholarship shortly before World War II.

But he'd enlisted in the Air Corps and flown a fighter plane in Europe until the war ended. Then he'd stayed in England and completed his education at Oxford. He'd returned to the University to teach. Finally, he'd entered the race for a Senate seat—and won easily. Now he was returning to Willow Creek to watch a football game between Willow Creek High and Helsey High.

He smiled and drew out the letter which had brought him. In a rough script the letter read:

Dear Senator Owen:

It's been several years since I last saw you at Willow Creek. I'd hoped to shake hands with you during the campaign. But I know you didn't have much time. All of us here are proud of you, I don't have to tell you that. Many is the time I've told people that Phil Owen and I went to school together. I guess you haven't forgotten Beata either. We've been married twenty years now, believe it or not.

I wanted to write you about our son, Keith. I always remember how much you liked football. You were a darned good player, with a lot of brains. Maybe you'll remember I won a letter myself, my senior year. But I broke an arm

and couldn't play out the season.

Our son, Keith, has turned out a darned good player too. Last year, as a junior, he was All-Conference and All-State, in Class C. He's had even a better year this year. The team is undefeated for the first time in twenty-seven years. And I might add that he has a 3.5 average in school. A lot of colleges are looking him over, including the University. And it even came to me that he would be good Academy material. They say he's the best quarterback this league has ever seen.

Well, it's been a long time, Senator. But I thought you might like to know that Keith plays his last game against Helsey High on November 18th, if you should happen to be in the state at that time. I've always had a dream that you might see him play for Willow Creek. It's a big dream, but it don't hurt to dream once in a while.

Your old friend,
Roy Craig.

Senator Owen returned the letter to his pocket. It was true that he'd attended Willow Creek High with Roy Craig. Yet it was difficult to visualize him clearly. He remembered that he'd been a small youth, too slight to be much of an athlete, although Roy Craig had always tried very hard at everything he'd done.

Roy had not been good at school

work, he remembered. He would often volunteer a vocal answer to a question presented by a teacher; as often as not he would be wrong.

But Roy Craig as an active football player he could not recall at all. He'd played only a few minutes in two or three games his senior year, gaining just enough time to win the letter. But he did remember when Roy Craig had broken his arm. It had been during practice.

Philip Owen had seen him hit a tackle dummy, sprawl clumsily, then get up to walk off toward the nearest building, his right arm hanging strangely. He had followed him to where he stood beside the red brick siding of the building, tears streaming down Craig's face.

"You hurt, Roy?"

"Damn it!" Roy Craig said. "I won't get to play any more!"

Philip Owen had not been able to understand why Roy Craig was crying, not for the pain of a broken arm, but for the interruption of a football career that had involved

no more than minutes of play. He didn't understand it now.

Well, he thought, as the helicopter slanted down toward the strip, he knew about the Craigs' son, all right. Even Roy Craig might not realize the extent of his son's fame as a football player. But it was real. The gesture of coming here to see the boy play would not hurt his local popularity. And he had wanted to visit Aunt Marie briefly.

There was always the possibility that the boy might want an Academy appointment. If that turned out, and he was as good in college competition as he obviously was in high school, this would all pay itself back.

They were peering up now, trying to see him in the bubble. He smiled again, thinking that he was back in his blasted home town. Then the helicopter touched macadam. The blades slowed.

Wearing the heavy gray overcoat he'd bought six years ago on the employee's discount, Roy Craig watched tensely as the Senator climbed from the helicopter. He felt the wind cold on his dry cheeks. He adjusted his hat more tightly to his head, against the wind, smelling the fuel of the landed helicopter.

"It's the Senator!" his wife said.

Of course, it was the Senator. And he'd come because he, Roy Craig, had written him that letter.

Homer Cook, vice president of the Willow Creek Community Bank, was already nodding eagerly. Well, Roy Craig thought, no U.S. Senator had come to see Homer's son, Roger, play football years ago. Roger was a clerk in Omaha now, and that's all he would ever be. But not Keith.

As the Senator strode toward them, Roy cleared his throat nervously. Homer Cook reached Owen first and shook hands, grinning in his usual ingratiating manner. Then Phil Owen was embracing his Aunt Marie, who had not condescended even to nod in Roy's and Beata's direction for years—until now. And finally Owen was shaking Roy's hand and Beata's.

"Good to see you again, Senator," Roy said.

"It's still Phil, Roy."

"Philip?" Aunt Marie said, sedate and austere in her black hat and coat. "You look pale."

Philip Owen smiled. "The sun never shines in Washington in the winter, Aunt Marie."

Roy Craig looked at his watch, thinking that all of this was wasting time. Philip Owen's eyes caught the movement. "We're running up against game time, and I don't want to miss the kickoff, Roy."

"You ride with us, Phil," Homer Cook said in his chapel-geared voice. "Follow right behind, Roy. We'll all go in together."

Roy Craig drove behind Homer Cook along the pocked drive which led to the blacktop. The airstrip

was two miles from the football field. He hoped that Homer would use the accelerator for a change. But when they rolled onto the highway, Homer continued to drive slowly, protecting the time, he knew, to engage Phil Owen in as much conversation as was possible.

Craig gripped the steering wheel, wondering if Phil Owen had noted the newness of this Plymouth. He'd traded in the old Dodge reluctantly, not at all certain that he could afford the new car. After working out at the grain elevator, then selling clothes at J. C. Penny's, all the while studying insurance at night, he'd finally opened his own general agent's office.

But his income had remained sketchy and low—he had a tendency to lose new business because of his blustery sharpness. The payments for the car were going to be difficult. And Beata was going to have to get it through her head that she would have to start watching her grocery shopping. But the father of a boy like Keith had to keep up a decent front. He wasn't going to let Keith down.

As they neared the parking lot, Beata said, "Isn't it the dickens that Philip Owen would fly all the way from Washington just to see Keith play today?"

"Why?" her husband asked gruffly.

"Well, he must be so busy."

"You just don't understand about Keith, Beata."

"He's only a boy."

"He's the best quarterback this state's ever seen."

Roy Craig parked beside Homer Cook's Cadillac, seeing that the Helsey team was already on the field. Homer was still talking to Phil Owen in the car. Roy felt his teeth aching from clenching them together.

At last Homer Cook got out. Phil Owen helped Aunt Marie from the back. Then he walked with Roy toward the field, leaving Homer to escort Aunt Marie and Beata.

"This Helsey team, Roy—"

"Damn tough. Class B, you know. This isn't conference today."

"I know. I've heard about a defensive back."

"Mulstrum. Six-four. Two-twenty-five."

"How big is Keith now?"

"One hundred ninety-five. Six feet two. But he's still growing, Phil."

They were moving in the direction of the section where he and Beata usually sat when Homer Cook came up hastily to say, "Special seats today, Roy. Behind the bench, halfway up. Special day all around!"

He hadn't expected that, although he should have, of course. Then, surprising him, there came the sound of light applause from

the crowd. He looked up quickly into the stands to see that people were standing up. The applause grew louder.

Phil Owen put his arm around Roy's shoulder. Roy finally allowed himself a tight, self-conscious smile. He heard Owen laughing. Beata was giggling in delight. Someone in the bleachers shouted:

"What's that boy going to do to 'em today, Roy?"

Craig suddenly plunged a fist up into the cold air as the sun shone down brightly from a white-blue sky.

II

WHEN HALFTIME arrived, the Willow Creek band began trudging clumsily over the chopped turf of the field, its music sounding discordant and dim. Sam Brocker had added the extra score made by the Helsey team just before the half ended. The figures now read: Willow Creek 0—Helsey 16.

The bleachers were silent. Roy Craig sat staring at the score, face stiff, hands gripped tightly in his lap. He could not look at Senator Phil Owen, who sat beside him in cautious silence.

Inside the field house, Keith Craig lay on a table, looking up at the white ceiling. His face was grimed, his knuckles skinned. His knee was hurting bad. Nearby, sitting dolefully on a bench, was Bobby Ellis, a tall, lean youth who had been Keith's friend for as long as either could remember.

"That damned Mulstrum!" Bobby said.

The coach, John Appleby, stood at the front of the room and was silent.

"If you're throwing," Bobby said bitterly, "Mulstrum knows it. He sticks with me like glue."

Keith was thinking about Francy. He'd found her in the bleachers before the game had begun, looking blossom-petal pretty in a white parka with her dark hair shining against the sun. She was the daughter of Ted Vernie, attorney at law, perhaps the most successful man in Willow Creek. They had been going together since the 8th grade.

"Then if you're going to keep or give," Bobby said, "he's there."

Keith lifted a hand limply and rubbed it over his mouth, tasting sweat and dirt. That bastard Mulstrum, he thought. A monster who kept throwing an elbow at his face, trying to drive it past his face guard. And he'd almost made it a dozen times. If he did, he would be spitting teeth all over the turf.

The thought sickened him. So he thought again about Francy. He didn't want to think about his father and mother, or Senator Owen, sitting up there. He'd detested the idea of his father writing that letter to Washington. He only wanted to think of Francy, right now. Not

because he loved her. But because today, especially today, he wondered what it would be like to make love to her. He never had, with any girl.

John Appleby finally walked back and said, "What do you want to do, Keith? Keep and give more? Or throw?"

"Throw. Make him go with Bobby. I'll start running then."

"They'll blitz. Those linemen are apes."

"I'll have to throw. Then run. Bobby?"

"Yeah. I'm faster than Mulstrum. Percentage-wise—"

"Listen," John Appleby said. "I'm only going to say that we can win this one!"

"By God, yes!" a large lineman said, standing up suddenly.

Yeah! Keith thought, getting up. In a pig's neck!

They were now into the fourth quarter. The defence, Keith thought, had figured out the Helsey offence patterns and stopped them. But the score remained the same. He called the play, then walked behind the others to the scrimmage line.

He crouched behind Douglas' rear and looked across at Mulstrum, a flat-faced youth with large lips which curled in tension. His eyes were small, dark and quick. As Keith started the count, he deliberately jerked his right shoulder. Douglas shoved the ball against his palms, and he sprinted

backward, listening to Mulstrum scream, "Blitz!"

The huge linemen came at him. Keith danced back, swearing when he saw his left blocker miss and a tackle running him down. He dropped and drew his knees up to protect himself.

Again he crouched behind Douglas. He counted. He jerked his right shoulder. Mulstrum screamed, "Blitz!"

As they charged, Keith dove forward past a good block by Douglas. Then he whipped down the field. Looking bewildered, Mulstrum reversed and went for him—too late. Keith crossed the goal line and rounded the posts, hearing the crowd explode.

In the bleachers Senator Philip Owen, face flushed with excitement, said, "He's beautiful, Roy!"

Roy Craig nodded, mouth dry. That tremendous run, and now it was 7 to 16, the kick good.

Keith sat wearily on the bench. He would have to go in again soon, and he didn't want to go in

again. Those linemen would be on him. And Mulstrum. They could kill him.

"Okay, Keith," John Appleby said. "You can do it!"

He stood up, muscles aching, and trotted onto the field, hearing the crowd cheering him.

With seven minutes left in the game, he counted and jerked his right shoulder again. Mulstrum stared at him brightly—he had figured it out now. He came thundering at the slot he expected Keith to use. But Keith backed and faked a showy handoff. Bobby was ahead of the goal line. He threw. Bobby caught the ball beautifully, lifting them out of their seats again. Ben Shreves got the point. The score was 14 to 16. Helsey led by only two points. But time was running out.

Again he sat on the bench. John Appleby stood beside him, watching the Helsey offence try to move the ball enough to make the first downs and keep possession. There were three minutes left, then two. Finally Helsey was forced to kick. Menckin ran it back to Willow Creek's thirty. Again Keith Craig trotted out.

Curt Black's voice boomed through the speakers: "One minute, fifteen seconds. When the game ends, everyone stay in your seats. There'll be a special ceremony."

In the huddle, Bobby said, "I can't shake the bastard!"

"I'll keep again," Keith said flatly. He followed Douglas out, counted, jerked his shoulder, took the ball, and knew, as he faked the handoff, that Mulstrum had read the play perfectly. Mulstrum hit him at the line like a car slamming into rock. He lay very still, knowing that Mulstrum would try to use his elbow again if he got up too fast.

He opened his eyes and looked at Mulstrum's ugly face and pig eyes.

"You like?" Mulstrum said in a high, girlish voice.

They huddled again. Now the crowd was on its feet, chanting, roaring, "Go, go, go . . ." Curt Black announced, "Thirty-one seconds." He'd taken too much time getting up, he thought. To hell with it.

He didn't care. Bobby looked at him desperately, saying, "We've got to have this one, Keith! We've *got* to!"

Why? he thought distantly. *Why* did it matter? Why did *any*thing matter? "Let's use the dipsy," he said. They looked at him in surprise.

Douglas said, "It can foul up, Keith." Craig shrugged.

They broke the huddle. He started counting again, then took the ball from Douglas, who crashed forward into the defensive center.

Keith moved backward, handing off to Menckin. Bobby had started

downfield, but stopped, pivoted and came back.

Mulstrum, looking bewildered, also reversed, seeing Menckin running to the right. Mulstrum started to follow, crossing, and Keith ran at him at full speed—it was not his move. Mulstrum was not looking at him, only at Menckin.

Keith hit him low, snapping him down across his back and driving an elbow upward in the same moment. He felt the elbow go past Mulstrum's face guard and heard bone cracking. Mulstrum hit the ground on the other side of him. Keith got up, legs churning, knowing that Mulstrum was going to stay there.

In confusion, Menckin was circling backward, losing ground, with the defense pouring at him. Keith ran back hard, jabbing a hand toward Bobby. Desperately, Menckin threw to Bobby. The defense swerved in Bobby's direction. Keith shouted as he moved around and back of the line.

Bobby Ellis flipped the ball to him.

The crowd screamed. He saw that there was no defence left except one slow guard and an equally slow tackle. He went between them, with the prostrate Mulstrum lying on his back in his path. He ran straight at him with high steps. He felt his right shoe drive into his middle as he went over him. Then he sprinted ahead, picking up speed. The defense straggled hopelessly after him. When he crossed the goal line, the bleachers were going crazy.

The gun sounded. Several started onto the field. But the officials stopped them. Keith looked downfield and saw that Mulstrum was still lying there. The Helsey trainer was standing over him.

Keith ran to the sidelines, listening to the steady roaring of the crowd. He watched as other Helsey players, the trainer and the Helsey coach all kneeled beside Mulstrum. They got a stretcher and carried him off. The crowd stopped roaring and applauded.

Doctor Havlock came out of the east bleachers and followed as they carried Mulstrum into the field house.

Once more Shreves was lucky and kicked the point. Then everyone started pouring down from the stands. They got John Appleby on Douglas' and Menckin's shoulders. Then Bobby Ellis and Shreves lifted Keith to their shoulders. There was a steady shouting of, "Craig, Craig, Craig . . . !"

Hurting all over, he saw his father trying to fight his way to him. But he was thinking about Mulstrum, wondering what that shoe in his middle had done to him. Then he tried to find Francy. At last he saw a new Thunderbird being driven slowly onto the field by George Cary, publisher of the Willow Creek *Standard*. Francy was

in the right-hand seat. He knew, then, what they were going to do with that car. But all he wanted was to look at Francy.

George Cary, his white hair ruffling with the slight wind, stopped the new Thunderbird as the crowd converged around it in the center of the field. He got out with Francy and stepped up on a folding chair. He saw Senator Philip Owen, and leaned down to shake hands. "How are you, Phil?"

"Just great, George. This is grand, isn't it? Simply grand!"

They let Keith Craig down near the car. Everyone tried to slap his back and shoulders. Then he looked at Francy, who stared back at him with worshipful bright brown eyes.

"George," Curt Black said, grunting and shoving his way forward, "take this damn mike, will you?"

"Friends," George Cary said into the microphone, "before we leave the field today, I want to say —and this with great respect for all the other players—there is one boy who has shown us what leadership, fight, stamina and just plain will and skill can do. You all know who he is.

"And I'm speaking for all of the merchants and everyone else who donated to this surprise when I say this brand-new Thunderbird is to be given to this young man in appreciation for what he's given to us: inspiration, excitement, respect and a renewed belief in the younger generation!" He took the keys from the ignition. "These, friends, are for one sweet quarterback—Keith Craig!"

Senator Philip Owen pounded his back. Keith saw, with surprise, that the man's eyes were wet. Then he was being shoved toward the car. George Cary stepped off the chair and handed him the keys and the microphone. Keith kissed Francy. There was a wave of laughter. A flash bulb went off, as he stepped up on the chair. The noise slowly died.

Finally he said, "I feel very humble at this moment. I don't deserve this—the honor belongs to the whole team. Winning the games, especially this game, was a team effort led by a fine coach. And I only want to say one more thing. There was one great linebacker today on the Helsey team named Robert Mulstrum, who was injured on the last play. I don't know how seriously he was hurt. But I wish all of us might bow our heads and give a minute of silence to pray that he's going to be all right."

In the locker room, he felt very distant from what had happened out there. It did not really make any difference that they had won. The damned game, he thought, had finally ended. That was all that mattered.

He showered quickly, thinking of Francy waiting for him in the

new Thunderbird. The other players kept yelling about that car. He was certain that half of them were jealous.

The other half was genuinely glad he'd gotten it; Bobby Ellis was one of the last.

As he dressed in gray slacks, black turtleneck and white ski sweater, Bobby sat on a bench tiredly, watching him, and said, "The guy from the University, you know?"

"Perkins?"

"Yeah. He came over. Said he liked what I was doing today."

"That's great, Bobby."

"Surprised hell out of me. I figured if I'm going to get a scholarship, it's going to be from Methodist Chapel or South Dakota Normal."

"You've been great all year. I'll talk to Perkins. He and Senator Owen are going over to my house."

"I'd appreciate it. You'll be at the banquet at the Peacock?"

"Right."

"Shirl's having something after. You know. At her house. You and Francy make it?"

Keith began combing his hair carefully. "Probably. Hear anything about Mulstrum?"

"They took him to the hospital. Broken nose, broken cheekbone. Maybe inside. I didn't see what happened."

"I couldn't get out of his way."

"You got him accidentally. And he was trying to do that to you all day. On purpose."

"I didn't want to hurt him."

"It could've been you. It damn near was."

Craig turned to look at his friend. "You going to get drunk tonight?"

"Me?"

"Why not?"

"I don't know. Are you?"

"Might."

"My God."

"Douglas going to get a bottle?"

"He always does."

"Tell him to get two." Keith removed his wallet and drew out a bill.

From summer-work earnings, he'd given his father enough money to hold and return to him week-

ly, as an allowance. The rest of his savings was in the bank.

Bobby Ellis took the bill, astonished, and put it in his own wallet. "I just never figured—"

"It's over, Bobby." He put on a black parka and left.

III

THE CRAIG HOUSE was six blocks west of the central business district, a white frame with a wide front porch and a sunroom on the east side, which Roy had converted to an office when he'd begun his general agency. Inside were two bedrooms. Roy and Beata used the one in back. Keith had the one in front.

The living room, though small, was nicely furnished with traditional mahogany chairs and flowered overstuffed pieces. Right now, Senator Philip Owen sat in one large chair; Manny Perkins sat in another. They talked earnestly.

In the kitchen Roy Craig stood beside a metal table, nervously trying to remove the plastic seal of a bottle. There may have been bourbon in this house before, but not since the time Roy had bought it.

Beata looked shocked and flushed. "I don't think it's right, Roy!"

"Everybody in the United States Senate drinks whiskey!" he whispered angrily. "That's what he's going to get!"

Roy walked to the living room, becoming even more tense. Entertaining just wasn't his line. "I was wondering what you men might want with your whiskey?"

Manny Perkins, plunged deeply into the chair, wore a heavy tweed jacket, soft shirt and knit tie. When he smiled, deep lines traced away from the corners of his eyes. "Just water for me, Mr. Craig."

"A glass of water, you mean? No whiskey?"

"The whiskey would be fine; with some water. That was what I was trying to say."

"Phil?"

"Water will be fine for me too, Roy."

Roy hurried back to the kitchen and arranged four glasses on the table. Beata said, "I suppose you're going to get drunk, like you did that time in the Army."

"That was twenty-two years ago."

Her eyes were misting. "What are the four glasses for, anyway!"

"One is for Perkins. One is for the Senator. One is for me. And one is for Keith."

She stared at him with widening eyes. "You must be crazy!"

"Now listen to me! There isn't going to be any foolish hysterics tonight. Our son's future is in the living room. You are going to get hold of yourself, and right now! Keith is going to have one drink. No more. Now open up the potato-chip sack and get the chips into

a dish. Then, for God's sake, try to get in there and hostess them people!"

KEITH DROVE the new car toward the west edge of town where Francy's parents had built a sprawling large new home three years ago, as Francy said, "Isn't this wonderful? I still can't believe it. I feel all college-like right now. You've *got* to go to the University."

"I'll take the highest bidder. How about West Point?"

"I can't stand to think about it. We've got to be at the University together, or there isn't any reason to live!"

He tried to envision Mulstrum lying on his back in the hospital with his nose broken and his cheekbone broken and his insides really messed up.

"Keith?"

He felt his fingers hurting from the way he was holding the steering wheel.

"Do you feel all right, Keith?"

"I'm fine."

"You played so wonderful today. You didn't get hurt?"

"Mulstrum was the one who got hurt."

"You're such a wonderful personality. You always think about the other guy. He'll be all right. I just know he will."

He turned the car onto her street, which was a wide elm-lined avenue, its new and large homes set well apart. He stopped beside her drive and saw that her father's Lincoln Continental was parked in front of the large garage.

He supposed that Ted Vernie had seen the game—a bristly man who had served two terms as county attorney, then returned to a healthy private practice and increasing prosperity dealing in real-estate investment.

Keith did not care whether or not the man had seen him play today. Their relationship at best had never been more than politely cool. But her mother had always been enthusiastic about him; he had tolerated her in the same fashion he'd tolerated Francy's younger sister and brother.

"You're going to the banquet at the Peacock?" Francy asked.

"Yes."

"I don't see why girls can't go."

"Tradition."

"Darn tradition. When will you pick me up?"

"When it's over. About seven-thirty?"

"Okay. Daddy and Mommy are going to the hotel for the reception, so they won't be here."

"I'll come straight to your room then."

"*Ke*ith!"

He took her hand tightly.

"What's got into you?" she said.

He grinned. He leaned across the shift and kissed her, making her lips part. She pushed back from him.

"Hey!"

"Better be nice, Francy. I'm a very big man in this town."

"Well, don't let it go to your head. You won't even get so much as another kiss tonight, let alone one like that last one. Boy!"

He grinned again. "Do you want to bet?"

Later, he sat in the living room and listened with feigned interest to Senator Owen, Manny Perkins and his father. As usual, it was easy to smile and nod and appear to listen intently, because all they wanted to hear was what they were saying themselves.

For no reason he found himself remembering that afternoon when his father had beaten him. It was strange that he thought of it today, when he hadn't for quite a long time. But he remembered all of it now, in detail.

He'd been thirteen that fall, in the final year of junior high school. It had been a very hot summer. Every afternoon he had lain on the bed in his room, looking up at the pale green ceiling, thinking about girls. They had, quite suddenly, become different to him. Francy, Shirl, all of them. He didn't know anything about girls whatever. His father had never told him anything.

Then school began again. Studies, even in the eighth grade, were not easy. His father, in fact, had gone to the superintendent, Mr. Fowler, and demanded that they intensify the program, because it would be to the students' advantage. There was always heavy homework to do. And there was always football practice.

But that day it was difficult to concentrate on anything. He'd finally told Bobby Ellis to tell the coach he didn't feel well enough to make practice that afternoon.

He'd gone home, knowing that his mother would be at the sewing gathering, that his father usually got off work near six o'clock. But he was surprised to hear his father's footsteps outside. He got up quickly and went to his desk and was sitting there when his father opened the door to look in.

"They call off practice?"

"I wasn't feeling good."

"What's the matter?" His father came in and examined him critically.

"I didn't feel good."

"You fooled around all last summer, doing nothing. I let it go. Now school's started. And football. You ain't going to lie around in here anymore. You're going to study when you're in here. And you're going to make football practice."

He felt himself becoming angry. He stared down sullenly at an opened book without seeing the printed words.

"Mr. Brocker was in the store today; do you know that?" his father said.

Mr. Brocker was his mathe-

matics instructor, and he knew where it was going now.

"He said if you didn't start waking up, you're going to have trouble passing!" His father's voice was rising. "What have I told you?"

"Study," he said grimly.

"You get this through your head. You can't sit around on your fanny, do you hear me? You got to hit them books, like I did, only harder. You think you're going to get into college lying around on your back? By God, you're going to straighten up on that football field too. Do you hear me?"

"I hear you, all right," he said sarcastically, smiling faintly.

His father, face darkening with fury, drew him up from the chair with a snap. He was almost as tall as his father that year. But he hadn't begun to put on much weight yet.

His father unbuckled his belt, as he always did when he was furious. Only once had he actually used it, and then with a single slap across his bare buttocks. Mostly he'd cuffed him, or used a switch—but never when his mother was present. His father's right hand held the buckle, ready.

"Are you going to use that tone on me again?"

"Why not?" He had never before defied his father in this fashion.

His father's head began to tremble with his anger. "Take off your shirt!"

Keith unbuttoned his shirt and took it off. Then he removed his T shirt too.

"Now what do you say about what I've been telling you?" his father raged.

"To hell with it."

He saw the belt snapped from the loops, saw it swung back, with his father's knuckles white. Then it was coming at him. With quick reflex, he turned so that the leather whipped across his back. He didn't feel the pain for a moment. Then it came. But he refused to let it show in his face.

"What do you say now!"

"To hell with it," he repeated.

The belt flailed against the skin of his back. He was startled by the frenzy that had caught his father—whipping that belt again and again, so that he was propelled toward the bed. He ducked and whirled and tried to catch the belt, but his father shoved him to the floor.

He felt the blow across his back again. This time he realized that his father had reversed the belt. The buckle struck him once, twice, three times. He gasped with the pain, doubling his hands into tight fists over his head.

Then it stopped. Slowly he looked around, eyes hot. His father, white-lipped and looking frightened, had backed to the wall. He stood there trembling all over, eyes wide, staring at the belt in his hand in disbelief. Keith lay there, not moving. Then his father said in a strange voice: "Get up."

He stood up, slowly, feeling the blood running warmly down his back. He looked at his father as though he'd never seen the man until now. He knew that he would never feel anything about him again. Never.

"Get into the bathroom. We'll get you cleaned up." His father still looked very frightened.

"I don't need help," he said flatly.

"Well—wash up then. You know why I done that, don't you?"

He stood silently.

"No need to worry your mother about a thing like this. No point in getting her upset. A boy's got to have respect for his mother."

He remained silent.

"You get cleaned up," his father said dimly, and left the room.

He went into the bathroom and bathed. The bleeding finally stopped. With a hand mirror he examined the welts where the belt had struck him. His back really looked pretty, he thought. Then he put on pajamas, washed the floor where the blood had dripped in his room, and was faking sleep by the time his mother got home.

He pleaded a virus for several days to get out of football practice. No one else would have found out about it, except that Bobby, when Keith had finally reported for practice, caught him by surprise as he was trying to get into his uniform after the others had gone out to the field.

Bobby Ellis looked at his exposed back with widening eyes. "What happened?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing!"

"All right. My old man beat hell out of me."

"Why?"

"I missed football practice."

"He did that, just for missing practice?"

"Yes."

"That doesn't make any sense!"

"Maybe some day I'll figure it out. Don't tell anybody, you hear?"

Bobby Ellis nodded quickly. "Sure. But—" He didn't finish; he obviously didn't know what to say.

THERE HAD BEEN nothing to say, Keith thought now, listening to Senator Owen and Manny Perkins and his father still talking. Nothing to say, nothing to think. He had never again missed another football practice. From that time on, he'd studied with the dedication of a Trappist. Not out of fear of his father, but because, by so doing, he freed himself from his father. His father had been unable to find complaint during all of these years. And he was required to maintain his distance because of it. That was all he'd wanted.

"Well, Senator," Perkins was saying, "you mention one of the academies. But we'd like to think the state's own university is just the place for this boy. Put it in terms of loyalty, if you will."

"I'm very loyal to the university," Phil Owen smiled. "I was on the faculty for a time, remember."

"Yes, I remember. And that's why I'm sure you'd like to see this young man there."

And so they talked. The words went into his ears, and he cared nothing for what they said. He had noticed with some amusement that his father had obviously bought liquor, seeing glasses on the tables beside both Perkins and the Senator. Then he saw with surprise his father lifting a glass from the rug beside his chair.

"What do you want with your bourbon, son? Ginger ale or root beer?"

At first he was astonished. Then he wanted to laugh. But he kept his composure and said, "Anything's fine, Dad."

"His first drink, gentlemen. He's going to have it with us."

"That's the way to do it," Perkins said. "Isn't that right, Senator?"

"I think it is, at that."

Keith looked at his mother, whose plump fingers were twining together nervously.

"You understand, Keith," Perkins said, "that we never try to pressure a boy into anything. You understand that, don't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"A lot of other schools will. That's why I'm here now. I not only wanted to see you play, but I wanted to talk to you before all the pressure really starts. I have an idea the coach himself just might come over here before you graduate. But in the meantime, just think us over. I hope you'll do that."

When Keith finished his drink, he felt a slight dizziness. He liked the feeling. His bruises and aches, especially that of his knee, were not bothering him so much. He was going to find Douglas and that bottle just as soon as he could get away from here and the incessant talk—barter for the meat on display: himself. The Thunderbird was waiting for him. And so was Francy.

IV

THE PEACOCK HOUSE was announced by a large powder-blue neon sign which matched the color of the building standing just off the highway. Keith swung the Thunderbird onto the graveled parking area and saw that Bobby Ellis was waiting for him.

As he got out, tiny hard pellets

of snow began coming down in scattered gusts, flashing whitely in the light of a large lamp attached to a tall pole. He could smell burning charcoal from inside. Cars were parked along a row of white logs placed lengthwise on the gravel. Douglas' hot-rod, a cut-down Ford, was at the back of the lot in near-darkness.

"They want to eat," Bobby said.

"Yeah. Well, the Senator and Perkins were talky."

"You spoke to him, didn't you, Keith?"

"Oh, sure." He realized now that he had forgotten to mention him to Perkins. But it didn't make any difference. "Where's Douglas?"

"In his car."

They walked back to look at Douglas sitting inside the hot-rod with a bottle in his lap, grinning foolishly.

"You get a bottle for me?" Keith asked.

"Sure!" He reached around the seat and lifted a bottle of Jack Daniels. "Old Number Seven!"

"Where'd you get it?"

"What's the difference? Hey, Keith. How's the Thunnerbird?"

"Great."

"You mean me and the other guys can use it now and then?"

"Sure."

"You're a good buddy, Keith."

Keith led Bobby back to his car. He removed the cap from the bottle and handed it to Bobby. Bobby looked at it uncertainly, then tipped it up. He coughed, sputtering and gagging. "Wow!"

Keith laughed softly, took the bottle and drank. He felt it going down, warming him. Yes, sir, he thought; he understood what Douglas saw in it.

Inside, the air was steamy warm, with the smells of broiling steaks, garlic bread and French fries mixing with that of the charcoal. The front part was the regular section of the restaurant, and the small banquet room was in the rear.

A tall man with a thick mustache stood up as Keith passed his table and grabbed his hand to pump it furiously. He didn't know him.

Then he saw John Appleby's wife with their two children seated in a back booth. They stopped there, and he said politely, "Hi, Mrs. Appleby."

She looked up, a dark, pretty woman in her mid-twenties, wearing a yellow dress which emphasized her good breasts and thin waist. She smiled infectuously. "Keith, Bobby. Congratulations!"

"Thanks a lot, Mrs. Appleby!" Bobby stated loudly.

She arched a dark eyebrow above a violet eye. She smiled again —a beauty, Keith thought.

She motioned for him to lean down. He did, smelling her light perfume, as she said against his ear, "Johnny's so proud of you, Keith."

He looked at the thrust of her right breast and straightened, nod-

ding. "That's what makes it worthwhile."

She looked at him warmly. "Go get those steaks."

The banquet room was large enough to contain two long tables placed in a T pattern. A slight waiter served rapidly. Keith sat between Coach John Appleby and Bobby Ellis, and watched the plates emptied in unbelievable speed.

The laughter hurtled past him. The talk, rising and lowering, registered just enough in his brain that he was able to answer that which was required. Forks and knives flashed in the bright light. Steaks disappeared.

"Where's Douglas?" John Appleby said.

Bobby leaned in front of Keith. "He couldn't make it, Coach."

John Appleby's nostrils moved slightly. "Maybe he *really* couldn't make it?"

"Well—" Bobby said, then laughed idiotically.

Keith was thinking of Maggie Appleby, sitting out there. He envisioned putting his arms around her slim waist, pulling her to him, so that he could feel her firm, large breasts against his chest.

"Have a good talk with Senator Owen and Manny, Keith?" the coach asked.

"Sure did."

"Manny put up any smoke signals?"

"It sounded good."

"I'll help any way I can, Keith."

"I appreciate that."

Then there were speeches. He gave a short one. Menckin started a "Three Cheers for Keith!" He'd always thought that Menckin was a mental case; he was sure of it tonight.

Finally Coach Appleby stood up and delivered his long speech. Keith listened to it distantly, thinking that it was almost the same speech he'd made last year, the year before, and the year before that. Then the coach said:

"Above all, fellows, I think the greatest play you made all year was the last one today. I'm only glad I taught you that one. And that you learned how to execute it so perfectly."

The laughter boomed. That last play, Keith thought. He'd fixed Mulstrum with it. He saw the coach turn to smile at him. As though suddenly realizing that Keith was thinking of Mulstrum, his smile left.

Appleby became serious, saying: "You're a great bunch of guys. God bless all of you."

When the applause was over, Keith shoved his chair back and walked out.

Moving through the front part of the restaurant, he looked again at Maggie Appleby, who did not notice him. He went outside where the snow was falling in large flakes, whipping at a cross angle with a wind blowing from across the creek to the north, stinging his cheeks.

There was a public telephone booth beneath the pole where the large light was attached. He stepped inside, looked up the number of the hospital, then inserted a dime and dialed.

"Willow Creek Hospital," said a rough female voice.

He closed his eyes, thinking of the gaunt, middle-aged Miss Wentell. He'd been in that hospital only once, when they'd X-rayed his knee.

"I'd like to ask about Robert Mulstrum."

"Who is this?" she asked harshly.

"Keith Craig."

The line was silent except for her breathing. Then she said, "He died a half hour ago."

He stood holding the telephone, saying nothing.

"Of internal hemorrhaging," she said. "If you'd like to talk to Dr. Havlock—"

He hung up and felt the wind blowing through a crack where the door was not quite closed. He walked across the parking lot, back into the restaurant. As he returned to the brightly lit banquet room, he saw that the party was finally breaking up.

He shook hands with several of the other players, smiling vaguely. John Appleby came over and said softly, "Sorry about that so-called joke of mine about the last play."

"It's okay."

"Keith, that wasn't anything that could be helped. Mulstrum's tough. He'll be fine."

Craig nodded, still smiling, watching them file out. Bobby waited for him at the door.

"I had a great quarterback going for me," the coach said. "Thanks for a great season. It's over now. And it's none of my business. But I figure maybe you and Bobby found a spring that gushes bourbon. Don't drink too much and drive that new car into the river."

Keith walked through the restaurant with Bobby, into the fast-falling snow. He opened the door and got behind the wheel. Then he folded his arms against the wheel and put his face against a sleeve. His shoulders started shaking.

"What's the matter?" Bobby asked.

His voice filtered out shakily. "Mulstrum died."

Bobby Ellis stood in the falling snow, his hair catching it, so that it began to look frosted. "Jeez, Keith—"

"Take off, Bobby."

"Sure," Bobby nodded, face white. "Just—take it easy."

Bobby Ellis walked back through the lot and saw John Appleby coming out of the restaurant with his family. He stared at the coach. John Appleby walked out to him. "Something wrong, Bobby?"

"Mulstrum died."

John Appleby's face stiffened.

"Keith's over there bawling his

heart out," Bobby said in a breaking voice.

Keith looked up, eyes spilling tears. He saw the coach starting in his direction. He turned the key, gunned the engine, then sent the car roaring out of the lot, tires kicking gravel. He found the bottle, uncapped it with his teeth, spat the cap into the other seat, and drank. If it hadn't been for that last screwed-up play, he thought, he wouldn't have had the chance to fix the bastard. His shoulders began shaking again.

He wasn't crying. He was laughing.

John Appleby watched the tail lights disappear swiftly down the highway.

"Oh, Johnny!" his wife said, taking his hand. "Everything was so perfect!"

"Yeah," he said. "It was." Ever since he'd left home in that tiny Iowa town where he and Maggie had known each other since childhood, he'd wanted to teach in a town like this, to coach a team like the one he'd had this year. He'd also dreamed that one day he would find a perfect, natural player. He had, in Keith Craig.

And now there was the scar of knowing that another boy had been accidentally hurt today, had died because of it.

"Can't we do something, Johnny?"

"Let him alone, that's all." He saw the cut-down Ford parked in the rear of the lot. "Is Douglas out there, Bobby?"

Bobby got out a handkerchief and blew his nose. "Yeah."

Appleby and Bobby walked back. Douglas had passed out on the front seat.

"Didn't get far, did he?" Bobby said.

"Tell Maggie to drive over to his house. I'll take him home in this."

"His folks are going to blow."

"No, they won't. They're at that reception for Senator Owen. I'll get him into his room."

"It wasn't Keith's fault, Coach."

"I know that, Bobby. I hope he does."

Appleby pushed Douglas to the other side of the seat, then started the engine. He drove back to Willow Creek and rolled the car slowly through the business section, looking at the falling snow reflecting against the globular street lamps.

His brother Hank, two years older than he, had gotten a job here as a deputy sheriff six years ago. A year later he'd written that there was an opening as coach and English teacher. John Appleby had just

gotten his master's degree from Iowa State, his daughter had been born two months before, and he'd applied. He'd gotten the job.

He drove Douglas' car into the garage beside the large old house where he lived. He half-carried him to the front door, opened it with a key on Douglas' ring, and continued up a stairway to his room. There, he got the boy's jacket off. He yanked his trousers free, then his shirt, and finally managed to stretch him out on the bed and pull the covers to his chin.

He returned downstairs, locked the door and put the keys in his pocket. Then he remembered the bottle in the hot-rod. He went back to the garage and got it. By now Maggie had driven up in his Chevrolet. He slid behind the wheel, seeing that the children were already asleep in the back seat.

"Bobby said he'd passed out," Maggie said softly.

He shrugged. "He'll hate himself in the morning."

"Will Keith too?"

"He's got it now." He started the engine and drove ahead.

"Are we still going to the reception?"

"I don't feel like it."

They were silent until finally she said, "This won't really hurt Keith, will it, Johnny?"

"I don't know. That boy—" He shook his head. "Ever since I first saw him, I can't remember his doing anything really offbeat. In four years of high school, he never missed a football practice. He was never late for a class. He was never unprepared. It isn't natural for a kid to be so damned perfect.

"Tonight I smelled liquor on his breath. It was the first time I figured he'd ever shown anything that wasn't just right. Then he said he'd been given a drink at home. He hadn't done anything offbeat at all. I don't know what this'll do to him. But—"

He stopped in front of a white building where a sign announced: *"Hospital."*

He got out and walked into a small waiting room, seeing Miss Wentell sitting behind a gray metal desk, looking back at him severely. Then he noticed Harry Reed, the Helsey coach, sitting wearily on a couch. He walked over to the spare man.

"Harry, I'm sorry."

Reed nodded, looking at him with his cold eyes. John Appleby sat down and said: "I thought if there was anything I could do—"

Reed shifted his shoulders. "Couldn't locate his mother for a while. We finally did. My wife's driving her from Helsey."

John Appleby said: "Craig's taking it hard."

Reed ran a palm along the side of his rough jaw. "True?"

Appleby looked back in surprise. "Naturally, Harry."

"Mulstrum was a tough kid. He played hard. Sometimes he played

dirty. He was going for Craig's face all afternoon."

"Maybe he was just caught up in the game."

"Sure. But Mulstrum wasn't very bright."

"He figured our plays all day."

"We scouted you, Johnny. We drilled your offence into every player day in and day out. I worked with Mulstrum specially, the same way I helped him with his school work. That was why he was taking you apart so much."

"I didn't know you were so close to the boy."

"I wasn't. Not the way you mean. I needed him, that was all. He'd have flunked everything but assembly, if I hadn't worked with him." He smiled tightly. "I helped kill him, you see?"

"That's ridiculous, Harry."

"Look. Mulstrum showed up four years ago, a fat kid, not very tall then. Dumb. He just didn't have much going for him. His mother's a nice fat woman, about twenty years out of Poland, and she still can't speak much English. She's on relief. She's had three more kids since her husband took off years ago.

"Mulstrum should have been a drop-out. Only I needed him." Reed laughed softly, bitterly. "You ever heard his voice? Same as his mother's. That gave him a lot of hell in the beginning. But he was strong. And he had coordination. He wanted to play, because he didn't have anything else. It made a hell of a player out of him. And it made a gut fighter out of him too, who'd win any way he could.

"I didn't teach him that. He developed it by himself. I couldn't break him of it either. Maybe I didn't try hard enough. Because I wanted to win too. I used him as hard as I could, Johnny. But nobody's going to use him any more. Because we killed him."

"We?"

"Harry Reed and Keith Craig."

Appleby felt his cheeks warming. "Harry, I know how you feel, but—"

Reed nodded grimly. "I've been trying to figure out why he wanted to do it. Craig, I mean."

"He didn't want to do it, Harry. For God's sake!"

"He's smart, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"Good grades then."

"The best."

"What's his IQ?"

"One hundred fifty."

"Mulstrum had a ninety-seven. How about Craig's home?"

"Not wealthy, but respectable."

"Hell of a handsome kid. I saw that Thunderbird they gave him. And the girl in it. You'd figure Craig and Mulstrum for opposites. But inside?"

"I don't know what you're trying to say, Harry."

"Craig looked at that big beef all afternoon—ugly kid, with pig's eyes, a girl's voice, smashing hell

out of him play after play, trying to bust up his pretty face. Something happened. I figure he reduced himself to Mulstrum's level. And nailed him. Because he knew that if you took away his own good looks, and his brain, and his background, and the girl who looks like a starlet, there'd be nothing left but another Mulstrum. Underneath they were the same thing."

"You don't know Craig. I do."

Harry Reed turned slowly to look at him with his steady eyes. "You've used that dipsy doodle exactly five times before, this year. It busted every time."

"It did today."

"Why?"

"It's a damned complicated thing. And—"

"What was Craig supposed to do?"

"Fade to the left, and—"

"He went straight out and got Mulstrum. He cracked him perfectly, right over his back, and drove the elbow into his face. Then he cut back, called for the ball, and ran forward to stomp Mulstrum in the gut. On purpose."

Appleby felt an anger now. "Not on purpose."

Reed let his breath out in a tired sigh. "You've got movies of the game?"

"Hap Jensen takes them."

"See if he followed Craig on that play. You'll see what I mean." Reed turned from him.

John Appleby could feel the invisible wall the man had now put around himself. He stood up and walked out to the car. He picked up Douglas' bottle, which was half full.

"Douglas buys good stuff, doesn't he?" he said to his wife. "You want some?"

"No," Maggie said. "Johnny, did you—"

"I saw Harry Reed." He removed the cap and drank. "Least Douglas can do for my taking him home, isn't it? Share his booze?"

"You sound awful strange, Johnny."

He saw Hugh Seltz's hearse coming down the street. It swung into the drive and stopped beside the emergency entrance.

"Johnny?" Maggie pleaded.

Harry Reed was wrong, he thought. Yet, as he tipped the bottle up again, grateful for Douglas' desire to get drunk on this night, he knew that tomorrow he was going to Hap Jensen's liquor store and find out how soon he could see that film.

KEITH CRAIG had parked the Thunderbird off the highway on a narrow dirt road which ran a short distance beside the river. The snow had stopped falling. He'd left the engine on to keep the heater running. They sat on the narrow back seat. He had an arm around Francy's shoulders. Music from the radio played softly above the

sound of the engine, its dial glowing before them.

She moved her face from his. "I don't even like the smell of it."

When he'd picked her up, she'd detected the whisky and immediately gotten angry.

She'd wanted to go to Shirl's, and he hadn't. But it was really the whiskey.

"If you'd drink some it wouldn't bother you so much," he said.

"I never want to!" Her voice became a little shrill. "I think I want to go home."

"Mulstrum died, Francy."

He felt her tensing. She looked at him with shocked eyes.

"I killed him."

"Oh, Keith! Don't talk that way!"

He picked up the bottle grimly.

"Keith, don't—"

"Why not?"

He drank again, and it was warm and beautiful.

"Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

"I shouldn't have told you at all. Do you want to go home?"

"No." She brought his head against her chest, as she leaned back. "Poor Keith," she said softly.

He moved his head to find her mouth again with his. He opened her lips. She didn't push away. In moments he felt her breathing quicken.

Then she realized that he was opening her coat. "Keith—" She began struggling.

"Come *on!*"

She wrenched free of him and pushed herself forward, getting the right-hand door open and scrambling from the car. He climbed out after her.

"Keith! Please . . . !"

He struck her across the left cheekbone. She gave an astonished gasp and dropped heavily to her knees.

The bushes were white around them, as she beat at him with her fists.

Keith finally stood and walked off a distance.

He could hear her sobbing. He came back and looked at her. Then he picked her up—she was limp and tears glistened on her face. He carried her to the car and adjusted her clothing. Her cheek had begun to swell. She sat sprawled in the seat, staring ahead, sobbing with her mouth open.

V

KEITH AWOKE when his mother came into the room. The sun was shining across his bed. She looked bright and cheerful. "Is my baby hungry?"

He sat up with his back against the pillow. "Morning, Mums."

She made a face. "I smell that awful whiskey your father gave you last night."

"I guess it hangs on."

"Well—" She forgot the subject in her pleasure of placing the tray on his lap. There was a plate containing scrambled eggs, bacon, hash-browned potatoes and buttered toast. There was a cup and a pot filled with coffee; the aroma, to him, was delicious. He had a heavy headache; his knee still hurt too. But otherwise he felt very good.

"What's this about, anyway?" he asked, smiling.

She looked worried, as though she might cry. "Someone telephoned. That boy? Fulstrum?"

"Mulstrum. I know, Mums. I found out last night."

"Honey, your father and I know that—"

"I don't want to talk about it, Mums."

Her head bobbed, and she looked relieved. "Then we won't."

After she'd gone, he went into the bathroom and looked at himself in the mirror, standing naked on the bath mat. They'd left some marks on him yesterday. But that was finished, he thought, feeling a great relief.

Dressed, he left his room. His father called to him from his office as he walked into the living room. He went out there. His father said, "Your mother said you didn't want to talk about it. We won't. Them things just happen. It's football."

"Yes, sir."

"What I wanted to talk about was that I happened into a fellow who's personnel manager out at Farm Equipment. He might have something out there for you. With football over, you're going to have plenty of time on your hands when school lets out. I'd get out there first thing next week, and see what he's got. How much is it you've got saved up in the bank from your summer jobs?"

"A little over five hundred," Keith said.

"Well, that ain't much in this day and age. You get there, in college, and you're going to need it."

"Maybe not, at the University, if it turns out the way Mr. Perkins said it could."

"There's never enough. This fellow's name is Hunter. Head of personnel. You go out and see him first thing next week."

"All right."

"You played a great game yesterday. But you can't sit on it."

"No, sir."

"One thing more. Don't get to

galavanting all over the countryside in that car they give you."

"No, sir."

Keith returned to the living room. He picked up the telephone and dialed Francy's number. When her mother answered, he kept his voice sounding natural and in control: "Keith, Mrs. Vernie."

"Oh, Keith!"

He heard dismay in her voice. He had an impulse to hang up. But he said, "May I speak to Francy, please?"

"Yes, of course, Keith. She told us about it. How it happened. Neither I nor Ted are going to be too angry about it. I mean, we understand. But you've got to be more careful in the future."

Again he felt apart from everything. Just what in God's name, he wondered, had she told her parents?

Then Francy said, "Yes?" He heard a click; he knew that she was using the phone in her room, that her mother had hung up in the kitchen.

"I wanted to apologize, Francy. I don't know how. But—"

"Don't. I told them you had a drink with your parents and Senator Owen and that scout. Then you forgot about the power brakes on the new car, and I was thrown into the dash." Her voice had an odd lack of tone.

"I told them I was coming down with the flu. Do you know what my face looks like?" Her voice shrilled again. "My cheek is black and blue—" She began crying.

"Francy, I barely remember. It was the whiskey, see? I didn't know what I was doing."

"The hell you didn't," she said, and he thought that was the first time he'd ever heard her swear. "You hit me with your fist!"

"Francy—"

"I'm going to tell them we had a fight, now, on the telephone. Because I never want to speak to you again!"

"If you'd listen to my side of it—"

"I got your side of it!" She stopped crying; her voice chilled. "Keith Craig?"

"Yes?"

"You filthy animal!"

Keith Craig attended classes the following Monday. Inevitably he met Francy in the hallway. She was with Shirl, who looked at him nervously. Francy, when she saw him, turned her head away and walked by quickly. Her cheek was still puffed and discolored. He turned and watched her walking away. That hadn't really hurt her, he thought. Why had she fought him?

He talked with Bobby and Douglas and the others, but without interest. In English class, he noticed that John Appleby kept looking at him in a strange manner. Then it was over, and he took the Thunderbird out on the highway, as he'd done the two previous days. The

higher the speed, the more excitement he could feel. The frozen fields flashed by. The car swerved dangerously where the snow plow had left too much snow. But he didn't give a damn.

Coming back, he saw the new building of Farm Equipment. He remembered his father's order to inquire about afternoon work. All right, he thought, he'd ask about a job. And that was as far as it would go.

He stopped in the visitors' parking lot and got out looking at the dark-green buildings with the wind cold and cutting against his face. It was nearly five o'clock. He'd timed it well to keep the interview to a minimum.

The personnel office was off a yellow hallway. He stepped into a small ante-room, where a blond girl in her twenties was typing on an electric machine. She looked up as he came in; her hair, done in a simple style, was the color of sweet corn. She had brown eyes, a small narrow nose and a full mouth. She wore a crisp white dress, and he could see that her figure was excellent. She met his stare directly, then her eyes moved, examining him carefully from face to shoes.

"I'm Keith Craig."

"I know, honey," she said in a deep, clear voice. "I saw every game this year. You're great." She showed him a white and perfect smile.

"Thank you. Is Mr. Hunter busy?"

"Why don't I find out?" She stood and walked to a door, moving with a deliberate swing of hips that intensified the feeling he'd had since he'd stepped in here. When she returned, she said, "He'd like very much to see you."

Hunter was a lean man who wore black-rimmed glasses and looked at him pleasantly from behind his tidy desk.

"My pleasure, Craig." He reached across to shake hands briskly. "Sit down."

"Thank you, sir."

"Your father said you were interested in part-time work."

"That's right, I am."

He appeared to be listening intently as the man began talking about a proposed job as an office boy, but he was thinking about the girl outside. A few minutes after five, she came in. "I'll be leaving now, unless you have something else, Mr. Hunter."

"That's fine. Nothing more."

She left quickly. And he wished that Hunter would hurry now, because he wanted to see her again. But the man talked on and on, finally saying, "Well, what do you think?"

"I think that sounds just great. But I'd like to have a few days, if I may, because I'm taking the college aptitude tests. When that's over, would it be all right to get in touch with you?"

"You bet your life, Craig. We'd be proud to have you on, even on a part-time basis!"

As Keith left the building, the air was turning colder with the sun moving out of sight. An eddying wind sent a whirlpool of old snow across the parking lot. Cars were moving out to the highway. A gray bus collected those who didn't have automobiles. Then he saw her standing beside his car, wearing a soft black wool coat, with the collar turned up around her pretty face, her cheeks colored by the cold.

"Well," he said, stopping beside her.

"You hit the jackpot with this, didn't you?"

"I guess I did."

"How does it ride?"

"I can demonstrate."

"I was hoping you would."

He helped her in, got behind the wheel. "Drive you home?"

"Sure."

He could smell her perfume now.

"You know my name," he said, starting the engine. "But—"

"Meg Griffith."

"I'm glad to know you, Miss Griffith."

She smiled. "*Mrs.* Griffith."

"Oh."

"But call me Meg."

"Sure."

"Don't let it scare you, honey. The Mrs., I mean. We are separated."

He nodded, relieved, feeling excited in her presence, and awed. He'd never been with a woman older than he, in this fashion. "I see."

"You don't. But you will."

"Where do you live?"

"The new development."

It was, he knew, a collection of small apartment units, constructed

by Farm Equipment for its employees on the southwest edge of town. He drove there, noticing that her coat was open and her skirt riding well above pretty knees.

"It goes nice," she said softly. "Does the girl I saw Saturday go with it?"

"No."

"Number eight," she said. "Put the car in the slot, if you want to come in."

"Thanks," he said, feeling overwhelmed. "But I'd better go home first. My mother—" He stopped in embarrassment.

She laughed softly. "How old are you?"

"Seventeen."

"I'm twenty-four. Does that frighten you?"

"Should it?"

"You're so damn young. I don't usually rob the cradle."

He found invitation in her eyes. Yet he was certain that if he tried to touch her, she would spring away, as Francy had. "I don't think I'd leave."

He hesitated, then reached out, to find her coming toward him. When he kissed her, her mouth was open; it moved hungrily against his.

"Maybe we better go in," he said shakily.

WHEN HE LEFT, he turned the car in the direction of the highway. There had been no more new snow since Saturday night. The moon was small and white in a clear sky. When he reached the highway, he pressed the accelerator down. There was still snow in patches on the blacktop, and there was ice in places. But he speeded until the engine was roaring softly and he could feel the speed.

Meg Griffith—he'd met her only hours ago. Yet she'd already become a part of his life. Why had Francy fought him?

He could feel the fury reddening his vision. He remembered blocking Mulstrum, feeling bone cracking against his elbow. He remembered coming around and feeling his shoe driving against his middle.

He saw the figure in his headlights, a slight man wearing a heavy coat, moving along the side of the highway where the snow was banked. He was walking toward the car, looking up, blinking against the glare of the lights. *What had they all wanted from him?* he wondered furiously. He moved the steering wheel. He saw the man's face white beneath a dark hat. The face showed disbelief, then panic. It disappeared, as he felt the cracking bump. He pressed the accelerator down, feeling the car fishtailing. He straightened and sped down the highway.

When he saw a roadway leading to a farmhouse, he slowed and turned in. He stopped and backed so that he was faced in the direction from which he'd come.

He drove ahead, fast, finally slowing a fraction when he saw the stiff figure lying spraddle-legged in a snow bank. He returned to Willow Creek. Who it had been didn't matter.

He rolled the car into the garage beside his father's Plymouth. He left the headlights on long enough to examine the front right fender. It was crumpled, although the headlight hadn't been damaged. He took an old blanket from a nail and threw it over the hood and fender.

Then he went inside, relieved to know that his parents had gone to bed. He went to his room, undressed and got into his own bed. His heart was hammering again, remembering the feeling of the car when it had struck the man. He

felt a surge of elation, as he had felt it running over Mulstrum.

Then he put that out of his mind and remembered Meg. He remembered all of the evening, in detail. He awakened the next morning feeling refreshed.

* * *

John Appleby sat at the breakfast table of his sunny kitchen, listening absently to the chattering of his small children. Maggie stood beside the oven built into a wall, waiting for their rolls to be heated.

She took the rolls out and carried them to the table. She sat down, wearing a blue robe, her face sleep-warm. He'd always enjoyed the mornings with Maggie and the kids. But this morning he was remembering the film Hap Jensen had given him the day before. He'd run the last part in the basement as soon as he'd gotten home, several times, to see that final play again. He was going to run it again this morning.

"What's the matter, Johnny?" she asked softly.

He buttered a roll. "Nothing, really."

There was a knock on the back door. Maggie got up to let in his brother Hank, a lithe, tall, muscular man who wore a white Western Stetson and a tan jacket which matched his twill trousers. He received the usual noisy greeting from the children, then sat down, grinning.

"Could smell those rolls driving by, Maggie. Just couldn't resist.

"Sure," Johnny smiled. "Like any bachelor who knows a good thing."

When Hank had eaten, then drunk three large cups of coffee, Johnny said: "Do you want to see the films of that last game, Hank?"

"Now?"

"Why not?"

"I saw the game, Johnny. The season's over."

"You ran them again and again yesterday, Johnny," Maggie said.

"Let's take a look."

Hank followed him down the basement steps to the recreation room. He had left the projector and screen up. He started the projector, saying, "Just the last play, Hank."

Hap Jensen's camera efforts were less than art. He'd worked from a top bleacher seat, and the play had confused him. Yet that was important, Johnny thought, because he'd kept the camera on Keith Craig after Keith had handed the ball off, thinking that he still had it.

There was the bobbing image of Keith handing off, then running forward. Suddenly the camera swung to pick up Menckin, as Hap found the ball carrier. He turned the projector off.

"All you want me to see?" Hank asked.

"What do you think?"

"Hap lost the ball."

"Long enough to follow Keith Craig running straight out."

"I know the play. He was balled up, I guess."

"Was he?"

Hank looked at him with his pale, expressionless eyes. "He hit Mulstrum after Hap swung away from him, didn't he?"

"That's right."

"What are you getting at, Johnny?"

"Harry Reed thinks Keith hit him on purpose, dropped him, gave him an elbow on purpose, then went around and caught him with his shoe going out, also on purpose."

They were silent. Finally Hank said, "What do *you* think?"

"I don't want to think that, Hank. But—"

"He couldn't have made a mistake finally? Maybe he's not perfect."

"Maybe I'm finding that out."

"Look, Johnny. You live for these kids. I don't. I take them as they come. Keith Craig looks like a nice kid to me. I wish they were all like Keith Craig. Just don't get so mixed up in their lives that you start dreaming up things. Don't read faults into being before they show up. If they show up seriously enough, then that's my worry. My God, Johnny. He didn't want to kill Mulstrum! Harry Reed just got emotional, that's all."

Johnny nodded slowly. "I guess you're right, Hank."

Maggie called down: "Phone, Hank."

They went up, where Hank took a white wall telephone from Maggie. "Yeah?" He nodded. "What happened, Walt?" Walt, Johnny knew, was Walt Eggers, Hank's small deputy.

Hank listened for several minutes, then said, "I'll run over to the court house and pick you up and we'll go out there." He hung up to say, "Somebody ran down Jack Bixby on the highway west of town. Killed him."

* * *

As Keith Craig stepped into the kitchen of his home, he saw that his father was finishing his last cup of coffee. His mother, who had heard him moving in his room, had already started his eggs and bacon. His father looked up at him. "You're going to shows instead of studying, is that it?"

"I got up early this morning and studied."

"Did you see Hunter out at the factory?"

"Yes, sir."

The anger seemed to disappear. "What did he say?"

"He said he'd have a job for me just as soon as I finish the college aptitude tests."

"They coming up?"

"I'll have to take them Friday, if I want to go to college. I think I'd better. Don't you?"

"Well, yes," his father said,

wholly satisfied now. He cleared his throat, got up and left without saying more. Keith sat down and smiled at his mother as she brought his plate.

"How was the show last night, dear?"

"I didn't go."

"You didn't?" She sat down at the table.

"I drove around for a while. I wanted to think about those tests."

"But you got home so late. It was almost eleven."

"It was ten, Mums. You must have been sleepy. I know you always worry if I was out past ten on a week night. I was thinking of you."

"I guess I was sleepy."

"Mums," he said in a low voice, "I was driving outside of town, on the old Mill Creek Road, you know?"

"Yes."

"It just happened. I couldn't help it."

"What happened, dear?"

"This calf was on the road. I killed it."

"Oh, my goodness! You could have been hurt!"

"It was Alfred Connell's calf. I think I should drive out there and tell him I was the one."

"But you couldn't help it, darling."

"I'm going out there this noon. If I have to pay him anything, I'll take it out of my savings. I really want to."

His mother put a hand on his. "You're such a good boy, to think of other people like that."

Keith went down to a basement dimly lit by a small-watt bulb. He got a sponge from a shelf near the metal sink and held it under the hot-water tap. Then he walked out to the garage, removed the blanket from the Thunderbird and carefully washed the crumpled metal. He returned the sponge, then drove away. It was not snowing, and that was important, he thought.

He went north from town on the highway until he came to the narrow road called Mill Creek Road. It ran along the back acres of Alfred Connell's property. His farmhouse and barn and windmill were visible in the distance.

He owned, Keith knew, a blade which he used on the front of his Jeep station wagon to keep this road clear, though it had not been kept as clean as the highway. As he rolled his car along, the tires left marks in the layer of snow remaining.

Black Angus were standing near the barbed-wire fence a half mile in. He stopped and got out, feeling the icy wind coming across the broad field which was deserted except for the cattle. He opened the trunk and found the tire iron. With that, he walked to the fence, examining the way the wire was held in place by heavy staples driven into the aged gray wood of the rustic posts. A hornless cow looked at him.

He put his hands on the post and pulled. As his muscles ridged, he stared at a calf standing beside its mother. Then he felt the post snap near its base. He forced the post down, as the old wire stretched, then stepped on the wood, riding it to the ground.

Keith walked into the snowy pasture and circled around the calf. He herded it, using his voice and hands, watching the cow move toward him. He got them both moving toward the opening he had created. When they went through, he trotted ahead of them. He waved his hands again, and the cow turned and moved back through the fence. As the calf started to follow, he stepped forward and drove the tire iron against its head between the eyes. The cow stopped and turned.

He pulled the post up again to block the opening. Then he walked back and struck the fallen calf again.

He jerked stiff hairs from the calf's hide and walked to his car, where he carefully inserted two strands into a small gap where the fender had been torn slightly away from the chrome encircling the headlight.

Then Keith got into the car and drove ahead, following the fence until he reached the place where the farmer had stopped plowing. He turned around and drove back in the direction of the highway, picking up speed. With the dead calf in view, he hit the brakes, skidding toward it, stopping just in front of the animal. Then he drove around it and returned to the highway.

He was on time for his first class.

When the lunch recess arrived, he drove to the bank and drew out fifty dollars from his savings. Then he speeded out to Alfred Connell's house and stopped beside that old white structure.

Connell's wife, a heavy-set woman with red cheeks, opened the door. "Keith Craig! My goodness, we've certainly been hearing about you. But we haven't seen you in ever so long. Come in! We're just eating dinner. Can't I fix you something?"

"No, maam. But thanks."

"Look who's here, Alf. Keith Craig!"

A spare, work-toughened man wearing overalls and a blue shirt buttoned at the collar looked up from a large plate of hot beef and mashed potatoes. "Well, hello, Keith. How are you?"

As a boy he'd often come out here and played in Alfred Connell's barn and ridden his horse. All of that, he thought, seemed a very long time ago. "I'm fine, sir. And—well, I've come to apologize, Mr. Connell. Last night I drove off on the Mill Creek Road in the new car they gave me. I was coming back, a little too fast, I guess. And I hit one of your calves."

The man stood up. "On the road?"

"Yes, sir. It was with its mother. I saw a fence post had been knocked down. I got the cow back in and straightened the post. I should have come right over here. But it was late. I'm sorry."

The farmer nodded. "You've told me now. I'm glad you did. Let's have a look. I can butcher the calf, anyway."

He smiled apologetically at Mrs. Connell, then followed her husband outside. He drove behind the man's station wagon to where the calf lay, stiff now, the blood frozen on the snow. He got out and watched Connell walk over to test the post.

"They must have bumped up against it too many times. I can get it fixed so more of them don't get out. I appreciate your getting the cow back in."

Keith drew out the fifty dollars he'd gotten from the bank. He handed it to the farmer. "It's from my savings."

"Keith, you don't have to do that."

"I'd sleep a lot better, Mr. Connell. I really would, sir."

Monty's Body Shop was in a fragile frame garage two blocks from the central intersection of the business district. Keith drove the Thunderbird inside and got out.

Monty straightened, welding torch in hand, and turned up his protective visor. "What do you

say, Keith?" He was a skinny young man with blackened hands and pocked face. He looked at the Thunderbird and saw the crumpled fender; his face stiffened.

Keith smiled. "I had to get in trouble with it right away, Monty. Is it going to be tough to straighten out?"

Monty walked to the car with quick, nervous steps. "I don't think so."

"How long will it take?"

"Just give me until tomorrow noon, say."

When Keith had left, Monty hurried to a telephone on a wall. "Hank? This here's Monty. You told me to call if anybody came in here with a bunged-up front end? One did—Keith Craig."

VI

HANK APPLEBY stood the black and white sheriff's car in front of the entrance to Monty's Body

Shop. Walt Eggars said, "I never figured anything like this, Hank!"

"There's nothing to figure yet, Walt." He got out and walked with his deputy into the garage, watching Monty move toward them between piles of injured fenders and hoods. Walt hurried directly to the Thunderbird. And Monty said, "I told him to give me until tomorrow noon. I ain't touched it."

"He didn't say how it happened, Monty?"

"I didn't ask him."

He walked over to the front of the car, where Walt Eggars was examining the metal. "Don't see any blood, Hank. Couple of hairs, stuck there where the chrome was loosened."

Hank surveyed the fender carefully, then took one of the black hairs between his fingers and drew it out. He bent it with another finger.

"Old Jack was gray now, wasn't he, Hank?" Walt asked.

"Yeah." He put the hair in a plastic container holding his driver's license. "Leave the car alone, Monty. If Keith comes back before tomorrow noon, let me know."

Fifteen minutes later Hank Appleby stopped the black and white car in front of the house with the wide front porch. He saw Roy Craig looking up in surprise through a window of the sun porch. He turned to Eggars. "Might be better if I handle this alone, Walt."

Roy Craig was already opening the door for him when he walked up the steps of the porch. "Something the matter, Hank?"

"Just wanted to talk to you, Roy. And Beata, if she's in."

Roy worriedly called, "Beata!" He motioned the sheriff to a chair and sat down tensely. Beata came in, immediately looking embarrassed and worried. Hank examined her, thinking: yes, she knows something. But Roy doesn't. He said, "I didn't see Keith's new car in the garage."

"Well, he drove it to school this morning," Roy said.

"Did you see it in the garage before he left?"

"No," Roy said, shaking his head bewilderedly.

"Beata? Did you see the car this morning?"

Her face turned reddish. "No."

"Do you know what this is about, Beata?" Roy asked.

She sniffed, then remained silent. Hank Appleby continued to watch her closely. "Was he home last night?"

"Well, he went to the show. Didn't he, Beata?"

She spread her fingers, then fitted them together again, silent.

"When did he come home?"

"I don't know!" Roy said. "I was asleep. What's going on, Hank!"

"Do you know what time he got home, Beata?"

"About ten o'clock," she said quickly.

Hank Appleby watched her eyes. When he'd talked to Jack Bixby's widow that morning, she had managed to tell him, in her grief, that Jack had gone over to a neighbor's house to play checkers the evening before. He'd walked. He'd stayed until ten-thirty. He'd been run down on the highway some time after that.

"You're sure, Beata? Ten o'clock?"

"Yes."

"Did he leave again?"

"No!"

Roy Craig rubbed his mustache nervously. "Why do you have to know what time he got home, Hank?"

"Jack Bixby was run down on the highway last night."

"I heard that! But what's that got to do with Keith!"

"Keith turned his Thunderbird into Monty's this noon with a crumpled front fender."

Roy's eyes darkened with shock. Then Beata said, "It wasn't that! He told me! This morning, he told me!"

"What are you talking about, Beata?" Roy shouted.

"He didn't go to the show! He drove out on Mill Creek Road. He hit a calf! Alfred Connell's. He was going to take some money from his savings and pay Alfred for it. He didn't have anything to do with Jack Bixby's getting run down!"

Her voice had risen, and now she began to cry. Roy Craig stared at her in confusion.

Hank Appleby let his breath out softly. He was thinking of the hair he'd taken from the chrome of Keith's car. A calf? And a coincidence? He only hoped so.

HANK APPLEBY stopped his car on Mill Creek Road, where Alfred Connell was working on his fence. As he and Walt Eggars got out, Connell turned around. "What do you say, Hank? How are you, Walt?"

"Afternoon, Alf," Hank Appleby said.

He looked at the tire marks in the snow. Included were tread imprints which matched those of tires on Keith Craig's Thunderbird, which he'd memorized. He saw blood stains in the snow, and skid marks coming in from the opposite direction.

"I understand that Keith Craig ran down one of your calves."

"Well, he did, Hank. The boy came to me this noon and told me about it. Wasn't his fault, the way I look at it. The fence post was shoved down by the cattle. But he paid me fifty dollars, out of his own savings. They don't come along like that very often, Hank."

Hank Appleby got a cigarette from his shirt pocket and lit it, feeling relieved. It had been a coincidence, all right. Whoever had run down Jack Bixby might be a thousand miles from Willow Creek

now. But the important thing was that it hadn't been Keith Craig; he could now tell Monty to fix that fender.

He was grateful, because that boy stood for something. There was nobody in the community who wanted to see that something tarnished.

At five the next day, Keith Craig parked the repaired Thunderbird in the parking lot of Farm Equipment. He leaned back, waiting, remembering how Coach John Appleby had called him into his office the afternoon before. Nervously, the man had gone directly into it.

"Keith, I was looking over the films of the game. That dipsy doodle. God knows I don't want to get into something sensitive for you. But the film shows you going out, and—"

Keith smiled. "It shows my hitting Mulstrum, doesn't it?"

"Well, no, it doesn't. But, Keith, I'm sorry I brought it up."

"The reason I went straight out was because I figured the play was going to break apart anyway. It always has. I knew Mulstrum would blitz. So I wanted to keep him off Menckin, because I could see he'd followed the play.

"I figured if I could slow him a little, I'd keep going out and call for the ball from Menckin. But Mulstrum was going straight for Menckin. I was between. So I blocked him. But I didn't mean to block him that hard. Then I knew I didn't have anything going for me downfield. So I signaled Menckin to throw to Bobby Ellis, to give me enough time to come around, *then* get downfield. That's the way it worked."

John Appleby's eyes had brightened. "Makes sense. I just didn't see what you were doing." The telephone on top of his desk rang. "Yes?" His face became even more relieved. "Yes, he's right here." He handed the phone across the desk. "Hank, Keith."

He took the phone, feeling his own blood running faster now; but somehow he knew that everything was all right. "Hello?"

"Keith, I wanted to tell you this personally. Jack Bixby was run down on the highway."

"Yes, sir. I heard."

"Well, you took your car into Monty's with a damaged fender. I had to check, understand. But I found out what happened. And everything's okay."

"Thanks, Sheriff."

It had come up again at home, but he was able to deflect his father's piercing questions by concentrating on the fact that he'd done the honorable thing with Alfred Connell. Then, this afternoon, after he'd picked up his car, paying for the repairs after another trip to the bank, his father had again tried to lecture him against staying out and driving all over the county.

But he'd gently insisted that he needed rest and to relax before

those tests, which were a complete defence against his father. He'd told his mother that he wouldn't eat at home, and walked out on her obvious disappointment.

Meg Griffith appeared. The cold wind whipped her coat, and her legs showed nicely as she strode toward him.

"I didn't know if I was going to see you again or not!"

He smiled. "I had an accident. I couldn't use the car yesterday."

"Not hurt?"

"Just banged the car up a little—I had it fixed."

"Ever hear of a telephone?"

"I'm here now."

Finally she smiled. She took his hand from the wheel and held it tightly as he drove out of the lot. "Miss me a little?"

"You know it."

"I missed you. I did, honey. Did you really think about me?"

"All the time."

"That's lovely. I was thinking of you too, all day—not my work."

"Do you like the work?"

"I despise it."

"Why, then?"

"Necessity, sweetie. My good husband left me without a penny. So work I must. Until I can save up enough to leave this damned town."

"I'm going to leave this town too, just as soon as I can."

"Where?"

"I'd like to go to Mexico City."

"Why there?"

"I've never been there. I've never been out of this state." He turned his head. "Would you go with me?"

She laughed softly. "I'd go *any*where with you, sweetie."

He drove the car into her car port. Inside, she took his parka; he sat on the sofa. She reappeared from the kitchen with two glasses and sat down beside him.

She sipped her drink. "Talk about yourself, honey. I want to know."

He did, carefully delivering bits of information that he was certain she might expect from him. Then he said, "Now you."

She shrugged. "I grew up in Omaha, on the south end. My old man works in a packing plant. He kills cattle all day long. My mother died when I was ten. That's about it."

"I don't think so. You were married. What about him?"

"A mistake. He was the small-time variety. But in the beginning I figured what the hell—if he got the big one he was always talking about, well, who knows? Honey, if

you saw the kind of so-called home I came from, the kind of neighborhood I grew up in, you'd understand."

She looked at him with bright, tough eyes. "When I was fourteen I was walking down this street. A car came along and stopped. There were two of them, seniors at South High, drunk. They got out and forced me into the back seat. They made me drink some whiskey. When I got home, and my old man smelled the booze on my breath, he beat hell out of me, no questions asked."

He stared at her, feeling his pulse beating; she appeared fresh and unmarked by life.

Finally she smiled at him again. "Enough of that, huh?"

"What kind of a guy was your husband?"

"A crook. Do we have to talk about him? Would you really like to go away with me—somewhere like Mexico City?"

"Yes."

"I don't believe in dreams any more, honey."

"I've got a great future."

"I don't doubt it, believe me. And all it takes is years. In the meantime, poor little Meg develops lines around her eyes and elsewhere. A sweet boy like you turns into an honest-to-God man, making lots of green. Where is poor Meg then? Oh, no. It's a dream, sweetie."

"All I want is to be with you."

"Right now, you do."

"We could do it."

"How? Everything takes money. Do you have money?"

"Not really."

"Then it's a dream."

Keith sat upright, looking darkly at nothing. Then he stood up. "I've got to go."

"Honey, it isn't my fault!"

"I've got to study."

She stood up with him, looking at him bewilderedly. "You'll come back? You won't regret."

"Sure," he said shortly, and left.

VII

THE DAYS AND nights drifted by in wavery slow motion. Keith studied just enough to appear prepared in classes. He took the college aptitude tests. John Appleby could hardly wait to inform him that he'd scored the highest of any previous Willow Creek student.

When his father confronted him about taking the job with Farm Equipment, he stated that his knee had been bothering him enough that he doubted if he could perform just yet.

If only, he thought, he could get into his car and take Meg and drive away from here forever. He went to the kitchen. "Mums, I'm going to drive over to Helsey this noon. To do a little Christmas shopping."

Before he left, he got his savings book from his desk and put

it in a pocket. He'd had $512.37 before he'd drawn the fifty out for Alfred Connell and the $35.00 for the car repair. Now there was $427.37 left. That was enough to get him out of Willow Creek, to Mexico City, in fact. But what then?

He drove to the bank, where he drew out all but enough to keep the account open.

The road was flat, with few curves. The farmhouses along the way looked bare and cold, in the midst of the frozen snowy fields. The miles dissolved. He was again remembering Mulstrum lying on that gridiron. He hadn't thought of Mulstrum for days. He remembered Jack Bixby, the farmer, too. The flash of lights on him. Then the bump.

Helsey's skyline was ragged against a pale gray sky, dominated by several smokestacks and the downtown high-rise buildings erected within the last few years.

Keith drove across the overpass crossing the east-west highway, which now by-passed the main body of the town. Then he rolled through shabby neighborhood avenues until they reached the grimy downtown section, where plowed snow was banked along the curbs, black with traffic exhaust.

He found a parking slot a block ahead and got out across the street from Drumm's Department Store, the largest in Helsey. He crossed to see behind one of the windows a mannequin wearing a dark suit and a fur stole. The figure reminded him of Meg.

He walked inside and took an escalator up two floors to the fur department. Twenty minutes later he left with a box containing a mink stole for which he'd paid $300 in cash. He placed it in the trunk of the Thunderbird.

It was near dinnertime when he arrived home. He told his mother that he'd eaten late in Helsey and wouldn't be staying home. He went into the bathroom, showered, then put on fresh slacks and a sports shirt. He had just finished dressing when his father came into the room.

"I went out to Farm Equipment and talked to Hunter about that job you're trying to get out of! What about that floozy? A married woman! They booted her husband out for stealing. That's where you've been nights, isn't it? Well, you're going to stay in from now on. You're going to get that job. And you're going to lay off that dame too, do you hear?"

"The hell I am," he said softly.

His father began to tremble. His face colored. His hands moved toward his belt, then stopped. He suddenly wheeled and left the room. His son laughed lightly, shaking his head. He put on his jacket and went out to his car.

* * *

Keith carried the box into the

apartment. Meg, who had just arrived from work, looked at it curiously. "What is it?"

"For you," he said simply feeling extraordinarily proud and pleased. He took her hand. "Meg, we could go away together, couldn't we?"

"I can't even quit the lousy job."

"But what if I had money. I mean real money."

"Where does it come from?"

"How about several thousand?"

"Oh, come *on*."

"Would you go with me then? To Mexico City?"

"It has to be Mexico City? I mean, as long as we're dreaming?"

"I've taken Spanish. I know the grammar. It wouldn't take me long to learn to talk like a native. Then I could find a way for us to live. With some money to go on, while I'm figuring out how to do it. I'm smart, Meg."

"Sweetie, it's a pipe dream. Know it."

"This isn't," he said, touching the box.

She pulled away the corner ribbons. Then she opened the lid. Her head began to wag, slowly. She took the fur out, eyes widening.

"Is it all right?" he asked worriedly.

"Oh, *hon*ey!"

THE NEXT MORNING, he walked into the living room of his house wearing a robe, well aware that it was nearly ten o'clock. He saw his father look up from his desk in the sun porch, face tightening with anger. Tough, he thought.

He heard mail being pushed through the slot of the front door. He bent to pick up the envelopes, looking through them without interest. One was constructed of especially good bond, addressed to him. He returned to his room, where he sat down and read:

My Dear Keith:

It is a pleasure for me to report that an appointment to the Air Force Academy is eminently possible, should it interest you. Understand, please, that I in no way wish to guide your path in any fashion. But in the event that such a future may prove attractive to you . . .

Keith crumpled the letter and flushed it with the envelope in the bathroom.

After breakfast, he walked downstairs to the basement. On a dusty pine shelf was a pasteboard box which had once held Heinz Soup cans, wound in heavy string. He brought it down, untied the string and quickly unwrapped an object covered securely with burlap.

It was a small German Walther .32 pistol. His father had bought it after the war had ended from a sergeant who had been in the European conflict.

Keith placed it in the pocket of his poplin jacket, balled the bur-

lap, then retied the string and returned the box to the shelf.

A half hour later, in Helsey, he saw what he wanted: a Salvation Army store. Inside, he purchased a worn cloth raincoat with a zipped-in fur lining. When he returned to the Thunderbird, he rolled the coat up and placed it in the trunk.

He made three more stops about the city. From a variety store he bought a pair of cheap unlined black leather gloves. From a large hardware store he bought twenty-five feet of thin clothesline rope and a short crowbar. From a drugstore he bought a wide roll of adhesive tape. He put all of the items in the trunk.

He drove back to Willow Creek, feeling the blood flowing hotly in his veins.

Friday morning he had breakfast with his mother. Then he walked out to the sun porch and smiled at his father, who looked up at him in surprise.

"Yes?" his father said.

"I just wanted to tell you that I've always been happy that you passed the test to get your agent's license."

His father stared at him in bewilderment.

"If barely," he said.

His father's face flushed.

Keith walked back to his room, showered, shaved, then dressed. The raincoat he'd bought from the Salvation Army store in Helsey was still in the trunk of his car, with the gloves, rope and adhesive tape. The pistol was in the glove compartment, beside a pocket knife. There had been eight bullets in the clip of the pistol. He'd fired one shot, in the country, to make sure the bullets were still good. Seven remained, with one in the chamber.

Now, he listened carefully, to place his mother in the house. Then he stepped into his parents' bedroom. His mother kept three white cotton laundry bags in the closet hanging on hooks. He took one. Then he bent to a paper grocery sack where his mother collected odd hose. He removed two from the sack and returned to the bathroom.

He drew a stocking over his head, across his face, and examined his mirrored reflection through the veiled filter of nylon. He had not been there in several years, he thought. Yet it was possible that he was known in Riverdale to whomever would be there late this afternoon. But with the nylon covering his face? It would, he decided, do.

He returned to his room and put the laundry bag and two stockings in a pocket of his parka, then went out to the garage to transfer the items to the trunk of his car.

At four-thirty he left his room, wearing his parka. He drove to the new development and put the car in the port beside Meg's apartment. Then he let himself into the living

room with the key she had given him. He sat down at a small writing table.

He found a linen tablet and a pencil and wrote:

Meg:
One of the guys wants help carrying some stuff down to his basement. I won't be long.

Keith.

He placed his car keys on top of the note and looked at his watch. It was two minutes to five. He left the apartment and opened the trunk of his car to stuff everything but the gloves into the laundry bag. Carrying that, wearing the gloves, he walked four blocks to see the familiar six-year-old Dodge parked in front of a small house as it was every night since he'd selected it as the right one. The blinds of the house were drawn, as usual. He ambled along, looking for someone else in sight on the block. There was no one.

Feeling his heart speeding, he got into the car. The key was in the ignition, as it always was—he'd chosen carefully, planned, counted on it, and it was working. He released the handbrake and felt the car moving down the slant. Sweat broke on his forehead despite the cold.

When he reached the intersection just a few feet below, he started the engine, then drove swiftly out of Willow Creek.

VIII

AT THE LIMITS of Riverdale, Keith slowed. There were a few clouds in the sky, and the early moon was low, near the horizon, so that darkness was nearly absolute. He drove by the bank, seeing that lights were on behind the drawn Venetian blinds. No people were on the boardwalk. The grocery and produce store were both closed. He turned right at the next street, then stopped at the mouth of the alley which ran behind the bank, killing the lights.

Feeling his hands trembling, he took the knife and pistol from the laundry bag and put them on the seat beside him. Then he removed the raincoat and put it on over his parka, turning the collar up. He slipped the pistol and knife into a right-hand pocket.

He took one of the stockings from the bag and got out, leaving the engine running. He trotted into the alley, carrying the bag.

When he reached the back door of the bank, he placed the bag on the iced, snow-banked alley and examined that door in the near darkness.

It was made of aging wood, blue paint peeling, with a brass knob. The keyhole did not look as though it had been used in years. He decided that it must be locked by a bolt inside. He only hoped that Meg's husband had seen that lock, possibly from a vantage point in

front of one of the teller cages, to believe that it was weak.

He drew the stocking over his head, barely able to see now. He used his gloved fingertips to place the tip of the crowbar. The door would have to give, or the whole thing was screwed up.

He yanked the bar, hearing wood splintering. Then he kicked the sole of his low boot against the door. It swung open. He caught up the laundry bag, tossed the crowbar aside and brought the pistol from his pocket. He stepped in and kicked the door shut, seeing the brightly lit room ahead through a half-closed door.

He ran toward the light, coming into the room as a small man with gray fringes of hair around the lower base of an otherwise bald head moved in his direction. An older woman with wrinkled, heavily lipsticked lips sat at her desk, hands poised above her typewriter. She already looked frightened.

Another man, puffy with a high white collar showing above a natty blue suit, was reaching for a telephone on a second desk.

"Don't," Keith snapped.

The baldheaded man stopped, eyes growing wide.

"On the floor!"

The baldheaded man, he saw, had been counting money on the middle teller counter. There were stacks of currency on the old polished wood. That one kneeled immediately, then stretched out on the oiled wood on his stomach, staring at him in deep fright.

Keith looked at the other man and the woman. The woman came off her seat, as though falling, and lay down, not looking at him, moaning softly. The blue-suited man remained with his hand extended toward the telephone.

"Move!"

The man dropped to his stomach.

They were spaced in a line along the floor behind the counter, all three with their heads toward the front of the bank. He opened the sack and took out the rope and roll of adhesive tape. He tied the baldheaded man's hands, then his legs. He cut two lengths of tape, with the pocket knife. He pressed one across the man's mouth, the other across his eyes.

He did the same with the woman, who continued to moan.

Then he repeated the process with the man wearing the blue suit. As he pressed tape across his mouth, he felt his eyes boring through the nylon.

Keith's stomach had knotted so tightly that he felt sick. Shoving the pistol into his pocket, he moved to the middle teller's counter and tossed all of the currency into the laundry bag. He ran into the vault. He found two metal drawers open and took the currency from them. He returned to the main room, estimating that he had used up perhaps four minutes.

His jaw had begun to tremble now. He looked at the blue-suited man, lying motionless, taped and bound, hearing the woman moaning. He kept remembering those eyes staring at him—in recognition?

He hesitated only a moment, then he took the pistol from the pocket of the raincoat and walked over to the man. He thumbed the safety off. He held the muzzle an inch from the man's temple. He fired. The sound of it seemed the roar of a cannon exploding.

The woman began struggling like a bound wild animal, her moaning much louder. He stepped over, pointed the pistol and fired again. He moved to the bald-headed man, who lay frozen in panic. He pointed and fired a third time.

Then he ran through the back room, out, carrying the bag, dropping the pistol into his pocket and tearing off the stocking. He sprinted along the alley in his best open-field fashion. He jumped into the car and turned it in a hard U-turn, tires skidding.

In the brightly lit interior of the bank, the man in the blue suit rolled over slowly. Blood covered his face. He breathed loudly with a wheezing sound. Using some inner strength he would not normally possess, he forced himself to sit up. He got to his knees, then to his feet. Using memory and instinct, he pitched toward the swinging door which opened to the front section.

Feeling consciousness going, he crashed through, feet loose, legs giving way. He fell into a front window to the left of the door. Glass shattered. The alarm started clanging, loud and insistant.

Twenty-two minutes later Hank Appleby, Walt Eggars beside him, brought the sheriff's car to a rocking halt in front of the boardwalk ahead of the bank. There was a small crowd gathered in front of the broken window. They moved through them into the bank. Two bodies lay behind the counter. By the broken window lay a bloodied figure in a blue suit. Kneeling beside him was the local doctor, a thick young man who looked up with dark eyes.

"The other two?" Hank Appleby asked.

"Dead," the doctor said.

"Him?"

"Just about."

Hank Appleby bent beside the bloodied man.

"Who did it?" he asked in a strange voice.

"Don't . . ." the voice came distantly.

"Do you know who it was?"

"No—" Breathing sounded. "He was big . . . Wore . . ."

"Yes?" Hank Appleby asked urgently.

"Stocking—"

"Over his face?"

"Woman's—" The voice stopped. The breathing stopped.

ON THE NORTH edge of Willow Creek in a shed beside the water tower, two blocks from where he'd left the stolen car, Keith Craig sat shivering on the floor. Finally he stood up stiffly and walked out.

He touched the cold steel of the pistol in the right pocket of his parka. Yes, he thought, he had left everything behind now.

He realized vaguely that he was just a few blocks from John Appleby's house now. When he was in sight of it, he stopped behind a large-trunked oak, shadowed.

John Appleby appeared on the front stoop. Maggie stood talking to him from the doorway for a few moments. The door closed, and John Appleby walked with springing steps to his car.

The lousy son, Keith thought, as the Chevrolet rolled away. With his pretty wife and his children, to live on in peace, satisfied, uncaring, protected, secure, *using* people, as he'd used himself . . .

He made his way around to the back of the house, removing the spare stocking to draw it over his head. He saw her filtered image through a kitchen window as she stood over the sink. He rapped quickly on the back door. When she opened it, he reached around the frame and snapped the light off.

She started to scream, seeing his stocking-covered face. But he caught her and turned her around, pressing a palm against her mouth.

She was strong and fought against his grasp, wildly. He tried to turn her around again. But she wriggled from his hands and clawed at his stockinged face. He felt her fingernails ripping his skin. He swung out at her, then ran out of there.

In Riverdale, Hugh Seltz, acting as country coronor, picked up the three bodies from the bank. Hank Appleby questioned a half-dozen people briefly, without results. No one had witnessed a single phase of the robbery and killings. He left Walt Eggars at the bank and returned to his office on the second floor of the courthouse in Willow Creek. His brother burst into the room, face white.

"What's the matter, Johnny? Did you hear—?"

"Keith Craig!" his brother exploded. "He attacked Maggie!"

"He what?"

"She recognized him. She thinks he was trying to rape her, for God's sake! He had a woman's nylon stocking over his head! He—"

"Stocking!"

Hank sat shocked. But he understood all of it, now.

When he'd explained the bank killings, he watched his brother sit down slowly, wagging his head in disbelief. "What *happened?"* he asked.

"Mulstrum. Jack Bixby? Three people in the bank. Maggie . . ." Hank Appleby shook his head abruptly. "We don't own a hero, Johnny. We own a monster." He pushed the telephone toward his brother. "Call his home. Just say you want to see him, about some school work."

Face ashen, John Appleby picked up the phone and dialed. Roy Craig answered. "Johnny Appleby, Roy. Is Keith home?"

"No, he isn't!" Roy said shortly, anger in his voice.

"I'd like to locate him. School matter. But it's important."

"Why don't you try some dame who works out at Farm Equipment?"

"Do you know her name, Roy?"

"Griffith. She lived out at the new development." Roy hung up. John Appleby reported Roy Craig's words. Hank stood up.

"Take the rifle on the rack, Johnny," he said, strapping on his pistol belt.

Hank parked behind the development. Then he and Johnny moved cautiously between the apartments from the rear. He saw the Thunderbird in the car port. "Go around to the back there, Johnny. That should be her apartment, to the right of his car."

Johnny nodded grimly, and disappeared around the concrete siding. Hank Appleby drew his pistol and stepped onto the small stone porch. He read the name "Griffith" on a mailbox beside the door. He pressed the button and waited. When she opened the door, she stared at him, then at the pistol, in surprise.

"Keith here?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"May I come in?"

"Well, but—"

He pushed the door open all the way and stepped in, past her, eyes moving quickly to examine the room. He opened the closet. Then he went into the kitchen and opened the back door. "Okay, Johnny." He crossed back and went into her bedroom. He looked in the bath, then the closet. He returned to the living room. Johnny walked in, carrying the rifle.

"Will you tell me what's going on?" Meg Griffith asked.

"Do you know where he is?"

She shook her head again, and he examined her good looks care-

(*Please turn to page 140*)

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fully. Meg Griffith. He remembered now that Farm Equipment had reported a theft by her husband.

"His car's out there," he said flatly.

"He—" She walked to the writing desk and picked up a paper. She handed it to him. He read the short note.

He looked at her again. "He killed three people tonight, Mrs. Griffith."

Shock and astonishment clouded her eyes. "No."

"He robbed the Riverdale Bank and shot all three who were in there, through the head, point-blank."

It was as though her face became soft clay, slipping and disintegrating. She sat down, heavily.

"You believe it?" he asked.

"I told him in detail about my husband's idiotic plan to rob that bank. But—" Her eyes flashed tears. She looked up at them, bewildered. "Keith wanted to go away so desperately. I kept telling him it would take a lot of money. I didn't think, didn't dream—"

The telephone on the coffee table rang softly. She looked at it, not moving. Hank Appleby nodded. She reached out slowly and lifted it.

"Yes?"

Her eyes gave away the identity of the caller. He watched her, his muscles feeling tight.

"I found your note, honey." Her voice sounded vacant. "Oh, I feel fine." Her slim hand was white at the knuckles as she held the telephone. "Now?" She leaned back against the sofa and tipped her head up, eyes closed, as though, Hank Appleby thought, she was taking these seconds to dream of how it might have been.

"Yes. Yes, of course, darling. I'll just take a bag. Good-by . . ." She put the phone down, then sat limp and stunned-looking. "He'll wait for me in a shed by the water-tower. I'm to drive his car there—"

The moon had moved higher in the sky, grown larger, and now it cast its pale light over the field to the north of the water tower. Hank Appleby stopped his car on the opposite side of the block. He and his brother got out.

"Down the alley," he said softly. "Don't take any chances, Johnny. Use that rifle if you have to."

They moved along the alley, quietly, and stopped beside a board fence. The pine shed rested across the street. Hank Appleby could see that the door was open a fraction. "If he tries to run, we'll send him toward the field back of the shed. Open there. We won't risk getting anybody else hurt—" He saw the door open an inch more.

"All right, Keith! You've got a gun. Throw it out. Then—"

Two cracks sounded from the shed. Slugs whined past them. Hank Appleby knelt and fired a shot at the door. It was returned by another whistling slug. He fired

back twice. Another slug smashed into the fence behind him. Then the door was kicked open.

Hank saw the large figure whip out and move in a fast, graceful run toward the field beyond. He followed. The youth stopped, whirled, lifting the pistol to point it at Hank Appleby. Hank dove and fell to his stomach beside the shed. He saw the silhouette of the boy against the sky and the moon and remembered those bodies in the bank.

He squeezed the trigger four times. It was not until some time later that Hank Appleby discovered that Keith Craig's pistol had been emptied.

* * *

Gusts of fine snow had whitened the streets of Willow Creek. The shops were busy with last-minute Christmas shoppers. People hurried from one to another, wearing heavy coats and scarves and hats.

The small automobile cortege rolled through the old iron gate of the Willow Creek cemetery. The snow stopped, leaving the graves freshly whitened. There were four vehicles in all.

Hugh Seltz and his assistant got out of the black hearse and went around to slide out the casket. Roy and Beata Craig sat behind in their Plymouth, looking at the movement with disbelieving, bewildered eyes. Behind, Bobby Ellis and Douglas stepped from Douglas' hot-rod and walked up to help carry the casket across the snow to where the grave lay.

Finally Reverend Pritchard got out of his old car, then walked up to stand beside the Craigs' car, trying to look at them with hope, and failing. Two diggers stood waiting beside slim poplars not far from the grave.

A thousand feet away, on a drive which rose from the lower central area, was John Appleby's Chevrolet. He sat behind the wheel, Hank beside him. They had silently watched the cars roll in and stop. Now Bobby, Douglas, Hugh Seltz and his assistant placed the casket gently beside the waiting hole.

Roy and Beata Craig got out of their car. Beata grabbed for Reverend Pritchard's arm and leaned on it heavily as they walked slowly toward the casket. Roy Craig, looking very frail, followed.

"I'd go down there," John Appleby said. "But after he died in the hospital, she got hysterical. I'm afraid—"

"Don't," Hank said softly, watching a new Lincoln Continental move slowly through the gate and stop a few feet behind the other cars.

John Appleby saw Ted Vernie and his wife in front. In the back sat Francy, pressing a handkerchief against her mouth. She took away the handkerchief. Her mouth moved. The large car started again

and rolled slowly out of the cemetery.

"Senator Owen phoned me this morning," John Appleby said in a hollow voice. "He kept asking me why. What could I tell him? That it was my fault, Hank? Did *I* push too hard? Always pushing, pushing—"

"Don't do that, Johnny."

They gathered around the casket. Reverend Pritchard read from a black leather Bible. Roy Craig removed his hat, and his thin hair moved with the light wind. Beata leaned against him.

"We all pushed him," John Appleby said. "I did. Roy did. The whole town did. But we loved him, don't you see?"

"I see, Johnny."

"Only maybe we just loved ourselves. Was that it? An image we wanted to love? To see a reflection of what we all wanted so much to be? Was that it, Hank?"

"Beata and Roy were his parents. They had to love him, Johnny. You know that."

He nodded, thinking of Maggie and the children at home, waiting for him, warming his life with love —because he loved them too. "But the love wasn't returned. I don't think he knew what love was."

"It's no use, Johnny."

He saw a girl wearing a soft black coat with the collar turned up coming through the gate to stop there and look across at the small group gathered around the casket. "I forgot about Mrs. Griffith. She must have walked all the way."

Hank nodded. "Did she love him? Maybe he did love someone —her."

"It came too late, then." John Appleby counted them out there, as the snow began falling again. "Do you know what it would have been like if he'd died accidentally, before anyone knew?"

"Yes," Hank said.

"A mob. All grieving—for what? For Keith Craig? Or for what he meant to them? Now they hate him. For destroying what they wanted from him."

The snow was on the casket now, on Roy Craig's bared head, so that he looked to be a very ancient man.

"Maybe now," Hank said, "Keith knows where it took him."

"Yes," John Appleby said brokenly, "maybe he does."

Next Month:

CORPSES ARE FOR KILLING

A New ED NOON Story

by MICHAEL AVALLONE

SWEET VIOLENCE

by ARNOLD ENGLISH

When Anne set out to do anything, chaos reigned and strong men fled for the hills. And then one day she decided it might be good to kill a man . . .

IT'S TRUE THAT Anne Wheeler bought a gun and loaded it up with bullets and made plans to kill her husband. But from then on the story goes haywire.

Put Anne Wheeler into anything, though, and it'll go haywire. Anne is one of those fragile looking blondes who dresses well but gets a run in a stocking, who can't ever find her keys and who has no head for figures. What Anne seems to need, of course, is some big strong fellow to take care of the aggravating little things that crop up in a day.

George Wheeler seemed to feel that his mission in life was to help

women in distress. His soulmate, of course, would have to be a girl so disorganized as to have made it into a flourishing career.

"George, darling," she'd say, for instance, "I can't find my gloves."

And George darling, who was trying hard to make out the dialogue of some play or movie he had taken her to, would look for that glove till the show was finished and he never did find out if the two lovers got together or if the butler did the murder. When the house lights went on, Anne would find that glove in the pocket of her coat.

She was a dilly—lovable, loose and limp-brained, when it came to anything that really counted.

There was the day she went to the track armed with a pencil, which she stuck blindly into a racing form and came up with a nag that paid $46 on the nose, and she had a ten dollar win ticket on him, to her astonishment, since she didn't know one horse from the other.

Even George was impressed by that one. Impressed, that is, until his little helpmate came out of the powder room with her eyes wide and slightly damp and allowed as how, in the excitement, she'd sort of flushed the win ducat down the point of no return.

Anne became angry at George when he started making complaints about her housekeeping, which was perfectly inadequate. Anne worked hard enough at it, but nothing was ever in place. She used to sweep and dust, but the only effect seemed to be that of rearranging the dirt rather than disposing of it.

In the depths of her rage and after a particularly savage set-to, Anne bought a gun, a small revolver. She had to remind herself to buy bullets and then to put the revolver away in a pocketbook which was like a jungle that only a machete could have cleaved a path through. It was her plan only to threaten George if he started to complain once more. She had no plans for any further action.

But she saw red when George started grumbling that night. Certain that she'd finally kill her man, she reached wildly for her pocketbook—

Today, the two of them are living happily ever after. Anne has reluctantly conceded that her housework wasn't up to par and makes strenuous efforts to improve herself. The efforts are paying off, but very slowly. She still makes a point of losing or dropping things when they're out, which George doesn't appear to mind at all.

Nor can anybody deny that Anne's change of heart was abundantly justified, even to her. For the great glaring unmistakable proof of her previous inefficiency is that when she opened up her purse to take out a gun and kill her husband, in all the clutter that made up the contents of her pocketbook, Anne simply couldn't find the gun.

(Continued from Other Side)

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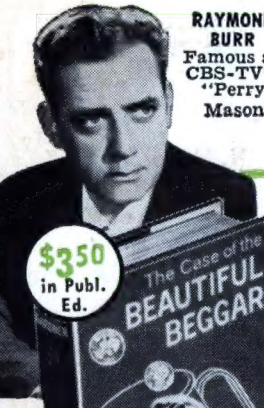

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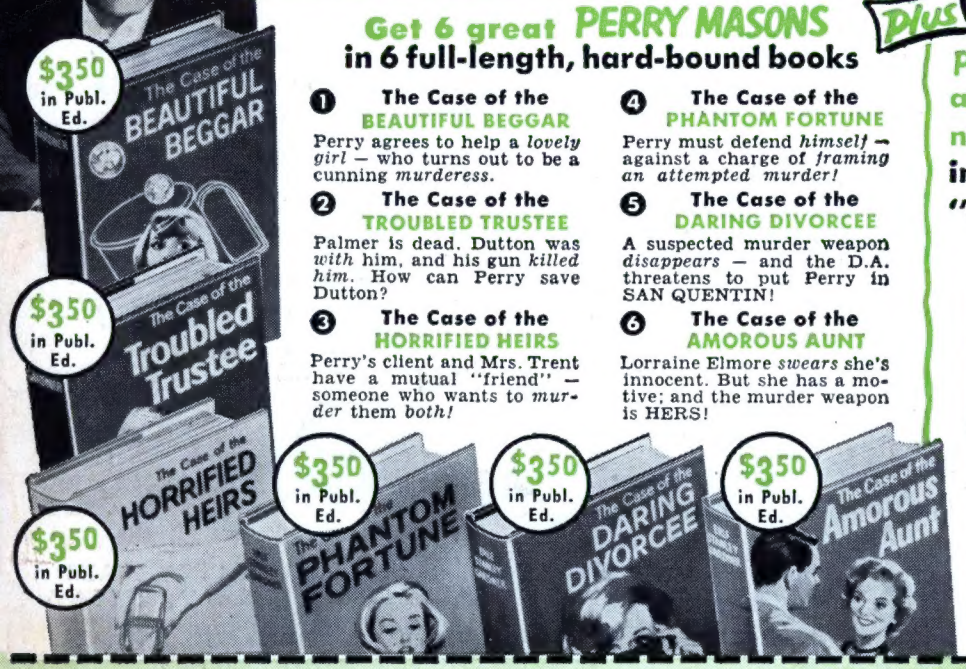
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